

Richmond Review

Sockeye disaster as run size cut to a tenth of forecast

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Published: August 11, 2009 6:00 PM

Updated: August 11, 2009 6:13 PM

The Fraser River sockeye have all but vanished in what is emerging as perhaps the worst year ever for the Pacific salmon fishery.

More than 90 per cent of the run that was expected to enter the river and head upstream to spawn is now missing in action.

The main summer-run had been expected to deliver 8.7 million sockeye.

Very low test catches led the Pacific Salmon Commission last week to downgrade that estimate to 2.8 million.

But today the commission slashed that estimated run size down to just 600,000 fish.

Combined with the early and late run stocks, just 985,000 sockeye are now thought to be either heading up river or approaching the estuary.

That's just a sliver of the pre-season forecast of 10.5 million.

"It's beyond belief," Sto:lo fisheries advisor Ernie Crey said. "It looks like this will be the end of the big sockeye runs for the Fraser. We've managed the sockeye into almost extinction now."

It means a "desperate struggle" for aboriginal bands upriver that will be deprived of a critical food source, Crey said.

He wants B.C. First Nations leaders to convene a "salmon summit" with Canadian, U.S. and B.C. officials to find answers and to begin to craft a sockeye recovery plan.

Fishing industry reps are also stunned.

"It's going to be devastating to everyone," said Irvin Figg, president of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union.

"Some people spent money on their vessels thinking they were going to have an opportunity and now that's not happening."

Figg said the sockeye that returned to spawn four years ago was a substantial run of seven million fish.

"There's no biological reasons that we shouldn't expect a decent return this year," he said.

If enough sockeye spawned four years ago and an adequate number of fry hatched, large numbers must have either been lost on their way down stream to the ocean or have died in the intervening years at sea.

There are some suspicions that sockeye may have found insufficient food at sea, potentially due to warmer ocean temperatures.

Unusual ocean conditions can also send more predator fish that eat salmon into northern waters.

Figg thinks it's possible too many fish spawned in the previous sockeye cycle, resulting in too much competition for scarce food.

Watershed Watch Salmon Society executive director Craig Orr wants to take a harder look at the impact of the expansion of fish farms along the B.C. coast.

The farms are blamed for a proliferation of sea lice that can infect passing wild salmon and weaken or kill them.

"Those farms are producing a lot of lice just as the juvenile sockeye are getting there," Orr said. "We're finding the lice are more numerous on the fish the closer you sample to the fish farms."

Orr said the province should err on the side of caution and shut down some fish farms to create a safe migration route for young salmon.

Alex Rose, the West Vancouver author of a book on Canadian fishery collapses, says a moratorium on all salmon fishing is essential and will likely have to remain in place for years.

"We're watching the catastrophic destruction of a resource," said Rose, whose 2008 book "Who Killed the Grand Banks?" warned B.C.'s salmon may go the way of the Newfoundland cod.

He points the finger at greed on the part of all sectors and a failure of federal fisheries managers to halt overfishing.

"We have failed, we have destroyed the resource," Rose said. "Nobody gets off the hook on this one."

A new royal commission – this time with legal powers to subpoena witnesses – may be

needed to get answers, he said.

So far federal fisheries officials have not yet acted on aboriginal calls for the shutdown of the sport fishery on the Fraser River. Anglers are allowed to target species other than sockeye, but some still catch sockeye.

It had been hoped 2009 would be a rebound year after dismal returns of 1.7 million and 1.5 million sockeye in the previous two years.

FRASER RIVER SOCKEYE

Early Stuart run

Pre-season forecast: 165,000

Now estimated at: 85,000

Early summer run

Pre-season forecast: 739,000

Now estimated at: 175,000

Summer-run

Pre-season forecast: 8.7 million

Now estimated at: 600,000

Late-summer run

Pre-season forecast: 900,000

Now estimated at: 125,000 (Harrison Lake only)

TOTAL:

Pre-season forecast: 10.5 million

Now estimated at: 985,000
