

A bad year for salmon, but there's hope

Russian River count low again, but biologists predict it's start of upswing

By [BOB NORBERG](#)
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It was another subpar year for chinook salmon in the Russian River, with 1,800 passing through the fish ladder at the Sonoma County Water Agency's Forestville facilities.

SALMON COUNT

Annual counts of Chinook returning to the Russian River

2000 1,445

2001 1,383

2002 5,474

2003 6,103

2004 4,788

2005 2,572

2006 3,410

2007 1,963

2008 1,125

2009 1,801

Source: Sonoma County Water Agency

The number was substantially lower than the peak of 6,103 counted in 2003 but better than 2008, and biologists believe it is the start of an upswing.

"I would still consider it low, although this is a wild, self-sustaining population that we didn't even know was this abundant," said Dave Manning, a senior environmental specialist for the Water Agency. "It is encouraging that we have this wild fish population."

The Water Agency has been monitoring Russian River chinook only for 10 years. It is a small percentage of the chinook run in the Pacific Ocean, but an indication of what is happening statewide, said Bill Sydeman, president of the Farallon Institute for Ecological Research.

It also is taken into account by federal fishing regulators who set the parameters of the commercial salmon season.

"The Sacramento River fish are the Big Kahuna," Sydeman said. "There were 800,000 chinook in 2002 in the Sacramento and 5,400 in the Russian River. Fishing restrictions are based on the fall run of chinook, and the Russian River provides context."

The collapse of the fishery in the Sacramento River fishery has been even greater than in the Russian River, plunging to less than 100,000 Chinook in 2008.

Chinook are listed by the federal government as a threatened species. The fish was the reason that Sonoma and Marin county residents last year faced conservation measures, which were efforts to keep water in critically low Lake Mendocino for the fall spawning run.

For its annual count, the Water Agency uses underwater cameras at the fish ladders around the inflatable rubber dam at Forestville, which is in use for most of the chinook run.

Harry Morse, a spokesman for the state Department of Fish and Game, said statewide figures are being compiled now and will be released at a meeting at the Sonoma County Water Agency in two weeks.

But he said preliminary counts are similar to the Russian River data. "At our hatcheries, in each case, we took in more fish than 2008, but 2008 was one of the lowest on record," Morse said.

The exception was Battle Creek, a tributary of the Sacramento River where the Coleman National Hatchery in

Anderson reported its lowest return in 30 years.

Coleman, the single largest producer of chinook in the Central Valley, had 8,300 return to Battle Creek, compared to about 10,000 for last year, said hatchery manager Scott Hammelberg.

In the Russian River in 2008, there were 1,125 chinook counted, the lowest in the 10 years of monitoring. In 2007, the count was 1,963 and in 2006 it was 3,410.

Sydeman said the chinook return is indicative of the ocean conditions when they migrate to the ocean two years earlier.

The fingerlings depend on an abundance of krill to survive, and ocean conditions for krill were poor in 2005 and 2006, but better in 2007 and 2008.

"I still think we need to be cautious about the improvement, it doesn't mean we are out of the woods," Sydeman said. "It is better, it is not good."

You can reach Staff Writer Bob Norberg at 521-5206 or bob. norberg@pressdemocrat.com.

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