

## Will there be a salmon fishing season this year? Decision next week

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Fishery regulators will begin debating Monday whether to allow sport and commercial salmon fishing in Northern California this year, following fish counts in the Sacramento River system that were the lowest in years.

No matter which way the Pacific Fishery Management Council leans, however, it is likely to be controversial.

"There are some guys thinking we shouldn't go fishing, because if their predictions are as wrong as last year, it could harm the fishery," said veteran Bodega Bay fisherman Chuck Wise. "But if their science indicates there are fish to catch, we should go fishing, we need to do that."

The council is considering three options, including a full season, a partial season and none at all, which would be a ban on commercial fishing for the third consecutive year.

The debate centers on the predictions made by the state Department of Fish and Game that forecasts there will be 245,000 chinook salmon returning to the Sacramento River system next year, well above the threshold set by federal regulators.

However, the same model predicted a healthy return this year, but the number of returning salmon, 39,500, was the lowest on record.

It throws substantial doubt on how the predictions are made.

"We don't understand what is going on well now, we don't understand the system and we don't understand what has changed," said Bill Sydeman, president of the Farallon Institute for Ecological Research.

If the state predictions are too high, a season could substantially harm the fishery, said Zeke Grader, president of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

"If suddenly we find out they over-predicted, we could be paying for it for years to come," Grader said. "For a charter boat operator, commercial boat or a fish processor, they are out of business, their job has been eliminated."

The council will begin its discussions on Monday at its annual meeting in Portland, Ore.

The three options address the sport and commercial season from Monterey as far north as the Canadian border.

The first option for commercial fishing on the North Coast would provide a season from the Matole River in Mendocino County to Monterey from July 15 to Aug. 29

and for the month of September.

Sport fishing on the North Coast, which began April 3, would be allowed to continue through Nov. 14.

A second option has a season from the Matole River to Point Arena open only in September, a season from July 15 to Aug. 29 from Point Arena to Monterey, and a season from Point Arena to Pigeon Point for the month of September.

In that option, sport fishing is allowed from April 3 to 30 and from July 1 to Nov. 14.

A third option closes Northern California totally for commercial fishing. Under this option, sport fishing would close April 30.

Grader said he believes there is substantial support by fishermen for the third alternative, closing the season again out of caution.

“There is uniform feeling there is not enough fish to justify it or chance it,” Grader said. “They are concerned if they went, would it do permanent damage rather than wait it out another year.”

The Fishermen’s Marketing Association of Bodega Bay will meet on Saturday to vote on the issue, said Chris Lawson, the association’s president.

“There are guys who feel we should not go until the spawning meets the 120,000 fish floor and others are saying they are offering us a season, we need the money and we should take it,” Lawson said.

Further confusing the issue are the experience of sport fishermen, who started fishing on April 3 and have reported good catches.

“They are doing good out of Bodega Bay, they are doing good out of Monterey,” Lawson said. “The Sea Angler was back at the dock yesterday at 11:30 a.m. with their limit of fish.”

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