Known to fishers as *Springers*, Spring Chinook Salmon are the Klamath River salmon stock most prized by native and non-native fishers. They were also once the most plentiful salmon in the Klamath River. But canneries, dam building and habitat destruction have decimated the wild stock. And while it is now unclear whether wild Spring Chinook will survive in the Klamath River system, fishing for these magnificent fish continues this year as it has in the past.

Five hundred adult spawners is considered by scientists to be the minimum salmon population necessary to sustain genetic diversity and insure against extinction. These days more wild Springers by far return to the Salmon River than to any other Klamath tributary. But fewer than 500 adult spawners have returned to the Salmon River in many recent years. The South Fork Trinity was also once a major Spring Chinook stream; in recent years only a hundred or so adult Springers have returned to spawn there. Even fewer of these fish now return to the New River and other high quality Klamath and Trinity tributaries which rise in wilderness. Springers are extinct in the Shasta and Scott Rivers which once supported healthy runs as well in the Klamath River above PacifiCorp's Iron Gate Dam.

Looked at in total, Klamath River Spring Chinook appear to be headed for extinction. And yet, even though they have become as rare as Klamath River Coho Salmon, the California Fish and Game Commission this year is once again allowing sport fishermen to take Klamath River Spring Chinook Salmon in the lower Klamath River seven days a week. The in-river sport season for Spring Chinook began on January 1st and lasts until August 14th when fishing regulations for Fall Chinook Salmon kick in. Spring Chinook can also be taken by anglers in the Trinity River above the confluence with the South Fork. Where the season ends on August 31st. During the fishing season, sport fishermen may keep 2 adult Klamath River Spring Chinook each day.

Yurok and Hoopa Indian fishers will also be taking Spring Chinook this year on their respective reservations. The Yurok Tribe's regulations for their reservation require a no fishing closure for tribal fishermen two full days per week.

Sport fishing for Spring Chinook Salmon is prohibited in the Klamath River and tributaries above the confluence with the Trinity River at Weitchpec and on the Trinity River above confluence with the South Fork. These closures are intended to protect those wild Spring Chinook which would presumably be used to reintroduce salmon into the Upper Klamath Basin when and if the PacifiCorp dams come down. Yet the Fish and Game Commission continues to allow these rare, wild fish to be taken all week in the Lower Klamath River.

The situation has prompted California Trout and other fishing groups to propose marking all hatchery Spring Chinook and only allowing marked fish to be taken by fishers. Tom Weslow, Cal Trout's senior salmon specialist, points out that many hatchery Springers spawn in the wild – an indication that they are interfering with wild populations. Marking the hatchery fish would make it possible to harvest them while releasing any wild fish caught in the process. However, the Department of Fish and Game which operates the hatcheries says marking all hatchery fish would be too expensive.

Sport fishing for Springers is most controversial in the Lower Klamath River where hatchery and wild fish are indistinguishable. In order to protect the wild fish, Yurok Tribal Fishing regulations include a full two day closure each week. On Mondays and Tuesdays Yurok fishermen sit on the beach and watch sport fishers take Springers. Wild Springer advocates have asked the Fish and Game Commission to impose a similar closure for sport fishing in the Lower Klamath. Under pressure from Lower Klamath River fishing guides, however, the Commission has declined to order the closure.

While debate continues the stock slides toward extinction. As in all mixed stock fisheries where multiple user groups compete for a limited resource and multiple management agencies craft regulations for different users, finger pointing is common and concerted action rare. That situation could change however, if the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (PFMC) were to act.

The PFMC is charged with managing all ocean fisheries in the region – including anadromous fisheries. It has a responsibility to develop a comprehensive management plan for Klamath Springers but has failed to do so. And while all stakeholders say they would like the PFMC to complete a Springer Plan, none of them have applied strong pressure or filed a lawsuit to compel development of a Klamath Springer plan.

The chaotic management situation allows continued exploitation of this prized fish unencumbered by an overall plan to assure that irt survives. In the short term this serves the interest of those who love to catch and eat these magnificent fish. But in the long run the prevailing chaos will lead either to extinction/extirpation or to a small, remnant stock which hangs on but does not flourish.

Endangered species laws could force Klamath Springer conservation. In its last status review, however, the National Marine Fisheries Service declined to list Klamath River Spring Chinook claiming that they are not genetically distinct from Fall Chinook. There are persistent rumors that a new Klamath Chinook ESA listing petition will be filed. New genetic studies have been

published which would support a finding that Klamath Springers are genetically as well as behaviorally distinct from Klamath Fall Chinook.

The story of Klamath Springers is not unique; it is being repeated in region after region around the globe. In spite of a plethora of commissions and regulations, the tendency to over-allocate increasingly rare fish continues. Every fisher wants someone else to be the ones to change so that Springers can survive.

No modern society has yet demonstrated that it has the wisdom and will to prevent the looming extinction of wild fish species. This is the situation on the Klamath River as well. Unless humans regain the wisdom and will to conserve Klamath Spring Chinook, these magnificent fish appear headed for oblivion.