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Waiting for the North Coast to stand up for Klamath salmon

By Felice Pace

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Salmon fishing and related commercial activity is a key determinant of economic health for North Coast communities from San Francisco Bay to the Oregon border. That's why recent announcements from the Pacific Fisheries Management Council (PFMC) indicating that salmon fishing is likely to be severely restricted this year have engendered broad concern in our communities.

Tribal communities of the lower Klamath River Basin are especially worried. For them salmon not only drive the economy they also provide key subsistence resources for tribal families.

The PFMC will set final salmon fishing seasons and quotas when it meets in Vancouver, Washington, from April 9 to April 14. Based on the three alternatives under consideration, it is clear that salmon fishing in the ocean off Northern California and in the Klamath River will be severely restricted.

But while the press heralds the impending disaster and talk of the need for disaster relief is growing, few reporters and even fewer government fisheries managers are talking about a core reason salmon fishing will be restricted in 2016 in areas where Klamath salmon swim.

For the past several years, most of the juvenile salmon migrating down the Klamath River have become diseased, many with not one but two salmon diseases. These are natural salmon diseases but they have become epidemic in the Klamath River due to poor water quality and the lack of the higher spring flows scientists tell us are needed to flush disease organisms from river gravels. In 2014 and 2015 up to 100 percent of the Klamath juvenile salmon tested while migrating down the river were found to be diseased. When some juveniles were radio tagged, only 8 percent survived to reach the estuary.

But federal, state and tribal fisheries managers and the Pacific Fisheries Management Council have ignored the loss of Klamath juvenile salmon. As a

result, managers' prediction of the ocean abundance for Klamath Salmon was way off in 2015, as was their estimate of how many Chinook would return to the Klamath River. Even though in-river sport and tribal fisheries did not catch their quotas, only about 28,000 Chinook salmon spawned naturally in the Klamath River in 2015.

Around 41,000 natural Klamath Chinook spawners are needed to maximize subsequent Klamath Salmon abundance, but the PFMC now estimates that only 14,540 fall Chinook will spawn naturally in the Klamath River Basin in 2016. These deficits are a strong indication that salmon fishing in the Pacific's "Klamath Zone" as well as in-river fishing will be limited for years to come.

The lack of salmon will hit tribal families hard. Commercial ocean fishermen will have little income and will call for disaster relief. Salmon related economic activity will be down all along the North Coast. And yet, in spite of this disaster in the making, no one is challenging the No. 1 cause of the continuing salmon disease epidemic in the Klamath River, the Biological Opinion governing operation of the Klamath Irrigation Project.

Why is it that those who once championed Klamath salmon by challenging Klamath River water management are now silent? The culprit is Klamath River Water Deals which prioritize irrigation water delivery and seek to buy off tribal governments with funding for "restoration" projects and to operate hatcheries while refusing to provide the spring flushing flows scientists tell us are essential to ameliorating the salmon disease epidemic.

As a representative of commercial salmon fishers, the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations once led challenges to Klamath Irrigation Project Biological Opinions which sacrificed salmon to maximize irrigation. Since its leaders signed on to Klamath Water Deals, however, PCFFA has blocked the lawyers who made previous challenges from taking legal action to overturn Klamath biological opinions that harm salmon.

Furthermore, those environmental organizations which regularly challenge salmon-killing water policies around the West have taken a hands-off approach to the Klamath. Those groups appear unwilling to take actions on behalf of salmon that tribal leaders may not support even when Klamath salmon suffer as a result.

The Klamath River and Klamath salmon clearly need new champions who are willing to act on their behalf even when the Obama administration, the Oregon and California congressional delegations and tribal leaders won't like the result. When will those champions stand up and do what is needed?

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