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Salmon disaster funds still sailing in
By Terry Dillman Of the News-Times

The final deadline has passed for fishermen and others to submit additional or missing paperwork on existing applications aimed to land some of the remaining \$70 million in federal disaster assistance for the beleaguered salmon fishery.

The Pacific States Marine Fisheries Commission (PSMFC) began disbursing an initial \$100 million - \$25 million to Oregon, \$11 million to Washington, and \$62 million to California, based on the projected economic impact of the shutdown in each state - in October 2008. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service released the remaining \$70 million of the fishery stimulus near the end of November 2008, completing an overall \$170-million assistance package first offered in September.

Feb. 13 marked the official end of the process for final disbursements of funding, although those who have existing applications pending can file a request for review. Deadline for that is March 1.

State and federal officials have been busy reviewing and processing applications from commercial fishermen, wholesalers, processors, charter boat owners, recreational guides, gill-netters, and others left high and dry by the salmon fishery shutdown. U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez declared a commercial fishery failure for the West Coast salmon fishery May 1, 2008, opening the hatch to the authorization of federal funds to help fishing families and communities navigate dire financial straits. Congress approved \$170 million in assistance in May, but the process ended up in the doldrums over a technicality in the 2008 Farm Bill to which the disaster funds were attached. Legislators re-approved the fund two months later.

The delay gave state officials time to work out a disbursement agreement among themselves and PSMFC, which received the money from the feds as a grant. Those discussions staved off difficulties encountered in the wake of the Klamath River-related disaster in 2006, when Oregon and California clashed over distribution philosophies.

The commission is distributing the funds based on the agreement to fishermen and related business owners who file the necessary paperwork. Anyone with questions or wanting to file a Request for Review should call the Salmon Disaster Relief Program information line (1-877-695-3456 in Oregon).

Gutted fishery

Gov. Ted Kulongoski of Oregon, Gov. Christine Gregoire of Washington, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California pegged the combined economic impact due to the closure at \$290 million.

The closure effectively gutted the West Coast commercial and recreational salmon fisheries in 2008, as indicated by the "Review of 2008 Ocean Salmon Fisheries" just released by the Portland-based Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC). The Salmon Technical Team, and staff from PFMC and the national Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) prepared the postseason review of the salmon fisheries off the coasts of Oregon, Washington, and California.

West Coast fisheries in council-managed waters - that is, ocean fisheries between the U.S./Canada border and the U.S./Mexico border from 3 to 200 nautical miles offshore - harvest mainly Chinook or king salmon, and coho or silver salmon. The 2008 closure centered on the dearth of Chinook numbers.

Based on Pacific Coast Fisheries Information Network (PacFIN) data, only 194 vessels participated in the West coast commercial salmon fishery in 2008, down from 1,007 the previous year. The overall harvest of 14,500 fish plunged by 91 percent from the 2007 haul, and was, historically, "the lowest on record." Total ex-vessel value dropped to \$1.2 million, again the lowest ever, plunging 90 percent below the \$11.9 million in 2007. The average per vessel inflation-adjusted ex-vessel value of salmon landings dropped to \$5,300, half of the 2007 level. It dropped 46 percent in Oregon, 33 percent in Washington, and nearly 100 percent in California.

The report urged caution in interpreting per vessel average, since "the entry or exit of a disproportionate number of small or large harvesters from one year to the next" can influence the average as much as "a change in the average revenues of those vessels

remaining in the fishery.”

Not much fun

The recreational salmon fishery occurs in primarily two modes: anglers fishing from privately owned pleasure crafts, and anglers using the services of the charter boat fleet. “In general, success rates on charter vessels tend to be higher than success rates on private vessels,” the review stated. “Small amounts of shore-based effort directed toward ocean area salmon occur primarily from jetties and piers.”

Not much recreational action took place, at least in Oregon, where ocean recreational salmon trips dropped from 88,300 in 2007 to 30,400 in 2008. All Oregon ports experienced a decline, with Newport leading the way with a 74-percent drop. The charter industry share of Oregon recreational salmon trips fell to six percent, half of the previous year’s share.

Overall, the preliminary number of vessel-based ocean salmon recreational angler trips along the West Coast was 67,200 - a 73 percent drop from 2007. The number of trips declined by 66 percent in Oregon, 50 percent in Washington, and almost 100 percent in California.

Prices up

Income impacts for coastal communities are estimated per commercial pound and per recreational fishing day. They represent estimates - based on reported landings by area and other factors - of personal income associated with harvesting, processing, and “first level distribution activities” in the commercial and recreational salmon fisheries at the local community (county) and state levels.

Combined impact for all three states hit a record low of \$6.9 million in 2008, well below the \$39.9 million in 2007. The commercial fishery netted \$1.4 million, down from \$19.4 million the previous year, while the recreational fishery drew \$5.5 million, down from \$20.1 million in 2007.

Prices for ocean harvest Chinook were the highest on record, averaging \$6.96 per pound, besting the previous highs of \$543 in 2006 and \$5.38 in 2007.

“One of the main reasons 2008 prices were so high was due to the extremely restricted 2008 fishing season,” the review noted. Fishermen and related business reeling from the closure already knew that.

The review is available online at www.pcouncil.org/salmon/salsafe08/salsafe08.html.

What lies ahead?

The Ocean Salmon Industry Group meets at the Hallmark Inn in Newport from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 26.

Co-sponsored by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association, it will feature, among other things, the 2008 review of ocean fisheries, 2009 coho and Chinook abundance forecasts, and development of Oregon Preferred 2009 Season Options by ODFW staff, commercial and recreational fishermen for input to the PFMC process.

For more information, contact OCZMA at 265-8918 or 265-6651, or go to www.oczma.org, or www.dfw.or.us.

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