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Forecast not looking good for B.C.'s salmon stocks this year

By Stephen Hume, Vancouver Sun March 6, 2010

Another disastrous season for B.C.'s iconic wild salmon appears to be unfolding even as yet another inquiry gets underway, this time into the collapse of last year's Fraser River sockeye runs.

Meanwhile, some scientists in the department of fisheries and oceans are warning that the outlook for 2010 is already worse than it was in 2009, when only about 10 per cent of expected Fraser River sockeye returns materialized.

Conservation concerns during the 2009 collapse of sockeye runs returning to the Fraser forced federal fisheries authorities to close commercial sockeye fisheries and first nations' food fisheries, which are important both to subsistence and cultural practices in many communities. The inquiry, struck last November and led by B.C. Supreme Court Justice Bruce Cohen, isn't expected to make an interim report before August, with a final report not expected until 2011.

The 2010 forecasts could have serious implications for aboriginal, commercial and recreational fisheries, the fish-processing sector and nature-based tourism. These industries represent a combined economic value in excess of \$2 billion a year for the B.C. economy.

Earlier this week, letters from the department of fisheries and oceans were circulated to chiefs, councillors and aboriginal fisheries managers notifying them of the preliminary stock estimates and possible conservation measures. Ottawa has also confirmed it is deferring treaty negotiations involving salmon until after the inquiry into salmon declines makes its findings.

Forecasting salmon returns is a notoriously inexact process. Runs can be influenced by many variables, including weather that affects water temperatures and can influence in-river survival and disease outbreaks, mistimed harvesting during migrations and poorly understood conditions affecting ocean survival.

However, based on estimates from previous spawning escapements and recent ocean survival rates, early assessments for salmon abundance in 2010 predict that only 29 of the 88 stocks evaluated on the West Coast will be at or above the target abundance for sustaining or rebuilding depleted or declining runs.

Of the remaining stocks, 34 are of conservation concern and 18 are mixed, meaning that for some spawning areas in a particular run, returns are expected to be low, while for other spawning areas they could meet or exceed the target. These mixed stocks create a major fisheries-management headache because allowing fishing on what appears to be an abundant stock might seriously damage a co-migrating stock that is in a precarious state, some with only a few hundred returning spawners.

Coast-wide, only 12 stock groups were estimated to have improved in status while 18 were reported as having declined.

Important runs where below-average returns are already being forecast include: early Stuart, early summer runs to the Pitt River, late Stuart, Nechako, Quesnel, Birkenhead, Weaver, Somass, Nimpkish, the mainland mid-coast north of Vancouver Island, Babine Lake, Skeena, Nass, Alsek, Stikine and Taku.

Although 2009 was a catastrophe for commercially valuable Fraser River sockeye and triggered the judicial inquiry -- harvest of these stocks is jointly managed under treaty arrangements between Canada and the United States -- a dismal outlook for chinook salmon in 2010 will be of equal concern.

On many spawning grounds, 2009 marked the third successive year in which the number of fish failed to replace even the parental spawning abundance.

A number of chinook populations on the west coast of Vancouver Island, the Fraser River and tributaries like the Chilcotin, Chilako, South Thompson and Cottonwood Rivers, and in rivers flowing into the lower Georgia Strait, continue to show decline or are already seriously depressed.

On the Fraser, where the 2009 returns of spawning chinooks had already hit record lows on some runs, "very low" returns of summer-run chinooks are projected for 2010, based on poor ocean survival rates and the low escapement of spawning fish in previous brood years.

On the Cowichan River, once so famous a stream that anglers' catches merited reports in The New York Times, the return of natural-spawning chinooks in 2009 was the lowest ever recorded.

The abundance of wild spawning stock on Vancouver Island's outer coast was the lowest it's been since 1995.

Coho stocks returning to the upper Fraser and its tributaries, the lower Fraser and streams flowing into Georgia Strait, all

continue to be of concern due to declines and depressed abundance.

Chinook and coho are the linchpins of B.C.'s vigorous recreational fishery. Although sports anglers harvest only about three per cent of the total catch, research shows they take more than 30 per cent of the chinook and coho salmon caught in coastal waters.

Although counts vary, some recent studies show the recreational fishery sustains almost 7,500 jobs, paying \$125 million a year in wages and benefits and more than \$75 million a year in taxes to provincial and federal governments.

It generates almost \$650 million a year in retail sales and distribution.

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