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State Decision to Dump Salmon Opposed by Salmon Fishermen

Reversal of highly successful trucking program means fewer salmon will survive

San Francisco -- The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) is abandoning a highly successful program that greatly increases salmon survival and is instead dumping valuable Feather River hatchery baby fall run salmon into a predator laden waterway starting Monday, April 25. Most will die. The Golden Gate Salmon Association opposes the move and calls on CDFW to instead restore transport of these baby salmon via tanker trucks to safe release sites downstream of the danger zone. Releasing baby salmon at safe sites in the western Delta and Bay greatly increases their survival and has kept the ocean fishery for both sport and commercial fishermen alive. This practice has proven especially critical during the drought. Without it, there almost certainly would not have been enough salmon to continue fishing.

In 2015, Feather River hatchery fish made up 76 percent of the hatchery fish taken by commercial salmon fishermen and 63 percent of those taken by sport fishermen.

“Just last month at a salmon information meeting CDFW presented evidence that trucked Feather River fish were the major contributor to salmon caught by sport and commercial fishermen in the 2015 ocean fishing season,” said GGSA chairman Roger Thomas. Thomas is also president of the Golden Gate Fishermen’s Association which represents charter boat owners and he holds a seat on the Salmon Stamp Committee. “We can’t understand why they now want to take these fish away from us when we need them badly to stay in business.”

“The Feather River provides the greatest single contribution of hatchery fish to ocean fisheries even though it is not the largest hatchery operation. The reason is that these fish are trucked past man-made hazards that decimate fish released upstream. Abandoning trucking, even in part, will hurt fishermen, related businesses, and consumers,” said GGSA board member Marc Gorelnik. Gorelnik is also chairman of the Coastside Fishing Club.

“If the state insists on dumping these fish into very dangerous waters where they’ll be lost, then the state should also release water from Lake Oroville to speed these baby salmon down the

Feather River past the danger zone so at least some survive,” said GGSA board member Mike Aughney. Aughney is also the owner of USAfishing.com website. “Before the dams were built, high snow melt runoff would keep the rivers turbid and rapid in the spring. These are conditions baby salmon need to safely move from the Central Valley to the Bay and ocean. Now with the dams, the rivers have less natural flow and sediment mixing and predation of baby salmon is much higher. There is plenty of water and snow now to allow for three or four days of water releases needed to help these baby salmon survive.”

In recent weeks fishing guides have documented high concentrations of predatory fish in the Feather and Sacramento rivers.

CDFW is reversing its proactive trucking practice because of theoretical concerns related to hatchery born salmon degrading the genetic purity of Central Valley fall run salmon and concern that trucked fish will lack the knowledge to keep them from straying into neighboring streams when they return from the ocean in two years.

Salmon fishermen puzzle over the stated attempt to establish a genetic distinction between Central Valley fall run salmon bred in hatcheries and other Central Valley fall run salmon that largely share identical genetics. Hatcheries have functioned in the Central Valley for over 100 years and in that time hatchery born salmon have returned as adults and recolonized virtually every Central Valley stream and river that will still support salmon.

“Study after study demonstrates there’s no such thing as a master race of Central Valley fall run salmon. All Central Valley fall run salmon show interbreeding with hatchery stocks going back over 100 years,” said GGSA board member Dick Pool.

Once one of California’s greatest salmon producing rivers, the Feather was largely destroyed by construction of the Oroville dam. State engineers refused to put a fish ladder on the dam when it was built, thus denying the salmon access to hundreds of miles of their historic spawning habitat now lost above the dam. Adding insult to injury, they diverted most of the Feather River downstream of the dam into a manmade, shallow pond called the Thermalito Afterbay. Here the water warms to temperatures lethal to salmon spawning and then flows back into the river. This largely destroys another 15 to 20 miles of otherwise good salmon habitat downstream and forces returning adult salmon to veer into the colder Yuba River to spawn.

“The state should first fix the thermal pollution destroying the Feather River caused by the Thermalito Afterbay. Then maybe we can talk about how to address the straying of Feather River fish into colder nearby rivers,” said GGSA executive director John McManus.

“We call on CDFW to truck the rest of this year’s Feather River fall run and resume a dialogue with key stakeholders on the future of trucking and hatchery management actions,” said GGSA founder Victor Gonella. “Our future is being decided by theorists who are out of touch with the families that rely on these salmon to make a living.”

Earlier this year fishermen watched as state officials dumped federally protected hatchery spring run salmon into the Feather River upstream of a known predator hot spot rather than truck them a

few miles further downstream to a point below the predator concentration. Most were probably lost.

“There’s disagreement over whose fish these are,” said GGSA board member Tim Sloane. Sloane is also executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations, a group representing commercial fishermen. “The state is simply a custodian for these salmon, which belong to all Californians, but whose numbers are dwindling because dams and other development are blocking their historic habitat. If the state chooses to act in a way that reduces the salmon we need to make a living, we think it only fair to be invited to partake in this decision that is so fundamental to our economic survival.”

The Golden Gate Salmon Association (www.goldengatesalmon.org) is a coalition of salmon advocates that includes commercial and recreational salmon fisherman, businesses, restaurants, a native tribe, environmentalists, families and communities that rely on salmon. GGSA’s mission is to protect and restore California’s largest salmon producing habitat comprised of the Central Valley river’s that feed the Bay-Delta ecosystem and the communities that rely on salmon as a long-term, sustainable, commercial, recreational and cultural resource.

In a normal year, California’s salmon industry produces about \$1.4 billion in economic activity and about half that much in economic activity and jobs again in Oregon. The industry employs tens of thousands of people from Santa Barbara to northern Oregon. This is a huge economic bloc made up of commercial fishermen, recreational fishermen (fresh and salt water), fish processors, marinas, coastal communities, equipment manufacturers, the hotel and food industry, tribes, and the salmon fishing industry at large.