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'A cultural tragedy': Karuk Tribe cuts salmon harvest to 200 fish

Karuk Tribe cuts harvest; fishery council to finalize 2017 season rules

By Will Houston, Eureka Times-Standard

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Orleans >> For the first time in its history, the Karuk Tribe will be limiting ceremonial salmon harvests for tribal members because of the record low forecast for returning Chinook salmon on the Klamath River.

Karuk Tribal Chairman Russell "Buster" Attebery said in a Monday statement that it was his "saddest day as chairman" to announce the tribe will limit harvest for sustenance and ceremonial purposes to just 200 salmon.

"This is the first time in our history that we have imposed limits on traditional dip net fishermen working to feed their extended families and tribal elders," he stated.

The tribe's announcement came as the Pacific Fishery Management Council met in Sacramento to discuss catch limitations for this year's salmon season. The council — which provides recommendations to federal fishery regulators — is expected to recommend a full closure of commercial and sport ocean salmon fisheries between the Humboldt Bay south jetty and the California-Oregon border — a stretch of coast known as the Klamath Management Zone. The council is set to finalize its recommendations Tuesday.

About 12,000 Chinook salmon are forecast to return to the Klamath River to spawn this year, which is a record low, according to the council. The Karuk Tribe states this year's forecast represents about 10 percent of the average run size during the past three decades.

Tribes and fishery scientists have attributed the low return to poor ocean conditions, drought and parasitic outbreaks in 2014 and 2015 that are estimated to have killed up to 90 percent of juvenile Chinook salmon in the river.

The council's troll salmon advisor David Bitts said Monday that the full closure recommendation for the Klamath River will likely not change. As a result, Bitts said the fishing fleet will have to catch Klamath River Chinook in other areas of the state and will have to maximize their catch on other fish species to make it through the season.

"All of us combined — ocean fishermen and the tribes on the Klamath River — are being managed to take about 8 percent of the Klamath fish that are in the ocean," Bitts said Monday. "That's a very small percentage. I'm just hoping there are enough other fish that some people can find a way to use the little bit of opportunity this year to make it through the year until better times.

“If I didn’t have hopes that some people could do that, I probably wouldn’t be pushing to get this little scrap of opportunity,” Bitts continued.

Salmon fishermen will have to venture to waters off of Monterey Bay, San Francisco, Fort Bragg and northern Oregon to make their catch, Bitts said. The Klamath Management Zone is not the only area being recommended for full closure. Bitts said that the council is vetting whether to close commercial salmon fishing between Coos Bay and Florence off the Oregon coastline, which only leaves the Newport area open, Bitts said.

The council also voted Monday to continue the closure of the Pacific sardine fishery for the third year in a row through June 30, 2018.

Bitts said there is a potential for allowing a very small quota of in-river sport salmon fishing on the Klamath River, but he said that decision will be made by the council today.

The low return of spawning salmon comes as a great concern for Native American tribes on the Klamath and Trinity rivers. The council allots the Yurok and Hoopa Valley tribes a salmon harvest quota each year as required under federal law. While the tribes have been allocated close to 100,000 fish during good years, they expect to receive less than 1,000 fish this year. The tribes are not only concerned on how this low harvest will impact their commercial fishing economy, but also how it will impact their ceremonies and their ability to feed their families.

“Where is that need going to be met? Like everybody, I don’t know at this point,” Hoopa Valley Tribe Fisheries Director Mike Orcutt said.

Yurok Tribe General Counsel Amy Cordalis said during [a press teleconference last week](#) that this year’s harvest quota would amount to one fish per every 10 tribal members.

“For a community that relies on salmon not only for commercial harvest but sustenance, this is going to hit our bellies,” she said.

The Karuk Tribe states that before European colonization occurred, the river once supported 1.2 million salmon, from which the tribe would harvest fish from about 120 villages along the Klamath and Salmon rivers. The 3,600-member tribe now fishes for salmon at a single site: Ishi Pishi Falls near Somes Bar.

The tribe uses a traditional 12-foot-long dip net to harvest salmon from the rapids below the falls.

Unlike the rights of the Yurok and Hoopa Valley tribes, the Karuk Tribe’s right to fish the river has never been formally recognized by the federal government, according to the tribe’s Natural Resources Policy Advisor Craig Tucker. As a result, the tribe self-limits its salmon harvest.

“When the fish are running, it’s a stunning site,” Karuk Tribe Natural Resources Director Leaf Hillman said in a Monday statement. “Ishi Pishi is more than a fishery, it’s [a] place where elders teach the youth how to feed their families, how to work hard and to be thankful for the gifts the Creator has bestowed upon us. Losing this opportunity is a cultural tragedy.”

The tribes, conservation groups and other stakeholders are now placing their hopes to the restore the salmon runs on a plan to remove four Klamath River dams. Known as the [Klamath Hydroelectric Settlement Agreement](#), the plan would remove the hydroelectric dams by 2020 to improve water quality and restore tributary habitat in the Klamath River Basin in northern California and southern Oregon.

“The Karuk hope the fish can hold out that long,” Saxon stated. “We’re having a great water year now. I hope the áama [the Karuk word for Chinook salmon] can hang on until we can remove these dams and give them a fighting chance.”

If the dams are removed, Orcutt said there are still several issues that will remain in the Klamath Basin such as water quality and water sharing disputes between ranchers and tribes.

“Those are all things that are challenges but things that need to be dealt with as well,” he said.

Will Houston can be reached at 707-441-0504.

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