

PRESS RELEASE

SALMON RIVER RESTORATION COUNCIL & WATERSHED RESEARCH AND TRAINING CENTER

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KLAMATH SPRING CHINOOK CREEPS TOWARD EXTINCTION *Historically the Klamath's Largest Run, Spring Chinook Numbers at Record Lows*

Somes Bar, CA - The population of Chinook salmon that swims up the Klamath River in the spring once numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Last week, divers at the Salmon River Cooperative Spring Chinook and Summer Steelhead Population Snorkel Survey only found 166 spring-run Chinook, which is the second lowest return counted in over 20 years. The Salmon River dive surveys have occurred every year from 1995, and have ranged from 90 to 1,600 adult spring Chinook salmon.

“We knew that fish diseases practically wiped out juvenile populations in recent years,” said Nat Pennington, Spring Chinook Specialist with the Salmon River Restoration Council and Board member of Klamath Riverkeeper, “still it’s a shockingly low number of spring salmon.”

Spring Chinook were once the most prolific fish in the Klamath Basin, with hundreds of thousands of fish returning to the river each year to spawn. They thrived in the headwater streams of the Klamath and Trinity, in tributaries such as the Sprague, Wood and Williamson rivers in Oregon, and the Shasta, Scott, South Fork Trinity and Salmon Rivers of California. Throughout the 20th century however, spring Chinook suffered precipitous declines due to hydraulic mining, diversions, large canneries, early un-checked harvest, sediment from road building and logging and especially dams, which blocked the salmon from accessing cold, low gradient rivers in the Upper Klamath Basin that provide some of the best spring Chinook habitat. The majority of the West Coast’s spring Chinook habitat was lost following the construction of dams such as those on the Klamath, Shasta and Trinity Rivers.

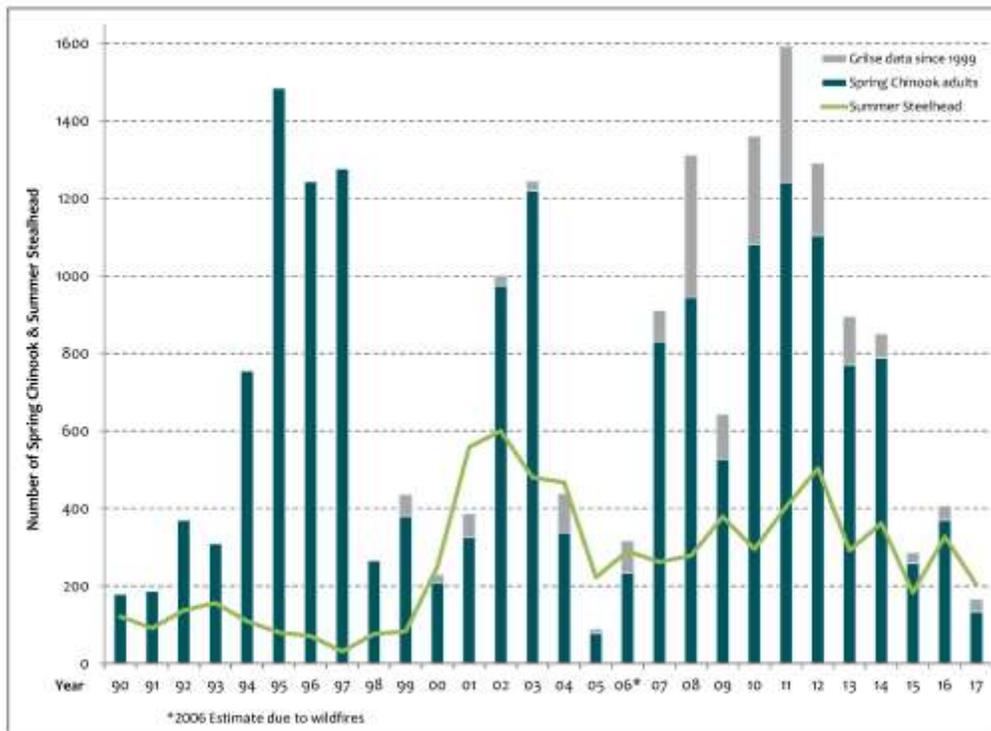
Kenneth Brink, a Karuk tribal member who works with the Tribes’ Department of Natural Resources said, “I brought my son Taydin to check out the big Salmon River Survey event for the first time this year. These fish are his future but when we see incredibly low runs like this you worry if there will be any left. This is why we must get the dams out. These are the fish that our grandchildren will enjoy once they can spawn and repopulate in the Upper Klamath basin.”

At this year’s fish dives, researchers from UC Davis presented evidence that Klamath spring Chinook salmon are genetically distinct from fall Chinook. “The years of surveys and sample collection by the Karuk Tribe and the Salmon River Restoration Council may finally pay off,” according to Karuk council member Josh Saxon. “If we can prove to Western scientists what the Karuk People have known since creation, we can finally get federal and state agencies to create a spring Chinook recovery plan for the Klamath River.”

Previous efforts to have Klamath River spring Chinook added to the Endangered Species list failed because of a lack of genetic evidence that spring Chinook were genetically distinct from fall Chinook.

“We look forward to seeing peer reviewed science once again explain how the Tribes had it right all along,” concludes Saxon.

The cooperative annual survey is coordinated by the Salmon River Restoration Council with collaboration from members of local tribes, the Forest Service, NOAA Fisheries, California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Watershed Councils and Community Volunteerism. The survey involves teams of counters snorkeling downstream for 3-4 mile stretches and covers over all 80 miles of river in one day. This survey is likely the longest running data set of this kind for salmon in the Pacific Northwest



UPDATED: 8/17/17 @ 12:30pm to update from preliminary data to final data.