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Commercial fishermen hit hard by king cuts

Net and troll fishermen will split a Chinook pot nearly 40 percent smaller than last year, ADFG announces

Correction: A previous version of this article stated that the Alaska Department of Fish and Game decided to cut an additional 10 percent above what Pacific Salmon Treaty guidelines call for. However, Pacific Salmon Treaty Guidelines prescribe reductions during extraordinary circumstances, which are being seen now, including a 10 percent reduction for conservation purposes. These actions follow treaty guidelines and are the result of a collaborative effort and coordinated plans between the United States and Canada. The article has been updated to reflect this change.

The all-gear harvest limit for Chinook salmon — the pot of king salmon divided between gear groups in Southeast — is about 40 percent smaller this year, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game announced Wednesday.

The reduction, from nearly 210,000 fish in 2017 to 130,000 in 2018, is based on an index of the abundance of fish ADFG expects to spawn on Southeast and transboundary rivers this summer. ADFG is expecting record-low returns

of king salmon on many river systems in Southeast.

“We’re pretty sure that these actions will pay dividends moving forward in terms of protecting our Chinook salmon production in the future,” ADFG Deputy Commissioner Charlie Swanton said by phone Wednesday.

Chinook on the Taku, Stikine and Skeena rivers are all expected to return in record-low numbers this year, according to ADFG. To combat this, fishery managers want every returning fish to make it past fishermen and up river to spawn.

Fish and Game will take conservation measures like this until Chinook numbers turn around, Swanton said. **They’ve already done so for sport fishermen** (<http://juneauempire.com/local/news/2018-03-29/king-fishing-cut-adfg-announces-conservative-juneau-fishing-plan>), who won’t be allowed to fish king salmon until June 15.

“We’ll just hunker down and see how long it takes before things turn around and we can be a little bit more generous with fishing opportunity,” Swanton said.

Fishermen anticipated a low harvest level, but it will actually be more conservative than predicted, Wednesday’s release announced. Following Pacific Salmon Treaty guidelines, ADFG and Canadian fisheries managers cut the all-gear harvest level an additional 10 percent beyond what Pacific Salmon Treaty guidelines would call for in a year of normal Chinook returns.

Trollers will be especially hard-hit by the low harvest level. Steve Merritt, president of the Alaska Trollers Association (ATA), wasn’t happy with the additional 10 percent reductions. He wrote in a Wednesday email statement that ATA has always been supportive of conservation measures |

“ATA is committed to maintaining our portion of the conservation burden of stocks primarily harvested in the summer months that will benefit from the 10 percent cut,” Merritt wrote. “However, this 10 percent reduction goes beyond reason when considering the savings to those stocks already generated by the current conservation plans.

Trollers’ wallets are tied more closely to king salmon than net fishermen. Restaurants and high-end fishmongers prize troll-caught kings and troll fishermen are paid a premium for their product.

Because they depend on king salmon, trollers are allocated a bit less than 80 percent of the all-gear harvest limit.

That’s about 95,000 Chinook. It may seem like a lot, but broken down, that’s not many king salmon for each troll fisherman.

Up to 70 percent of those 95,000 will be up for grabs during a July 1 opener, according to **Board of Fisheries** (<http://juneauempire.com/news/local/state/2018-01-23/fish-board-cuts-king-salmon-fishing>) rules, with the remainder available in a second king opening in August.

If per-pound prices (\$7.32), the number of boats (717) and per-fish weights are similar this year to last year, an average troll boat would gross \$10,859 off its share of those 95,000 fish. Fuel, food, gear costs, loan payments and crew shares eat into that number substantially.

Struggling trollers can target coho and chum salmon as well, and many boats make good money off those species. But historically, king salmon have been the trollers’ bread and butter in Southeast.

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