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Opinion

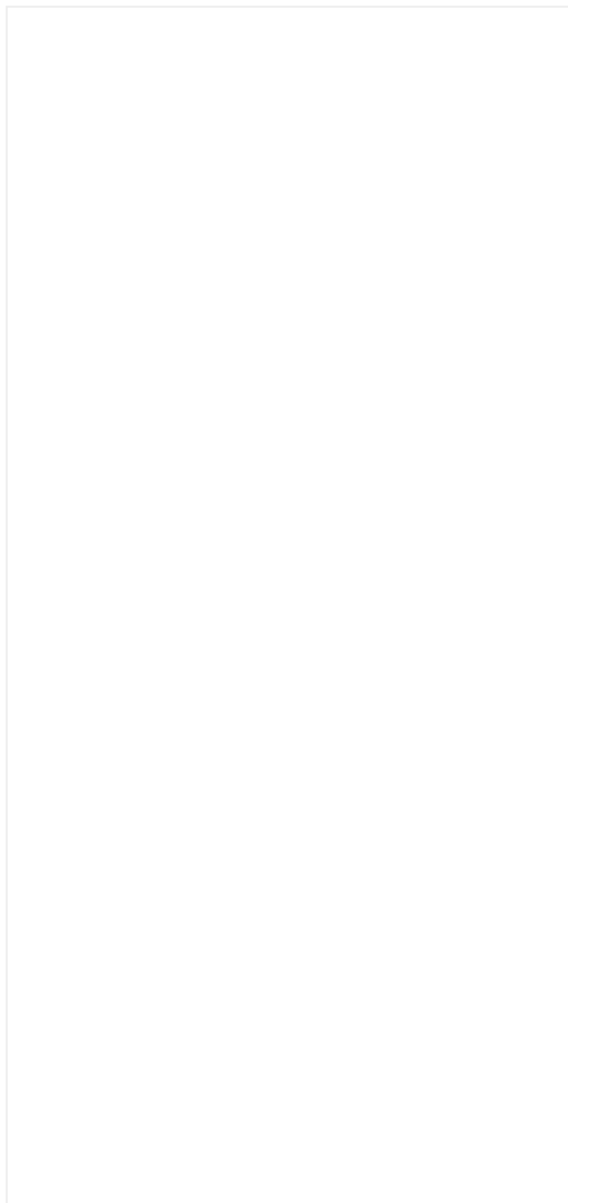
# We can't survive more cuts to Alaska king-salmon quota



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Caven Pfeiffer, on the wooden troller *Sword*, joins a parade of boats June 19 to protest changes to the Pacific Salmon Treaty that call for more king-salmon quota cuts to be imposed on Alaskan fishermen. The bridge in the background is the O'Connell Bridge in Sitka, Alaska. (Courtesy of Brendan Jones)



**Alaska salmon fisherfolk have been giving up a disproportionate portion of their harvest — over 50 percent, at least — to rebuild damaged stocks elsewhere.**

By [Brendan Jones](#)

*Special to The Times*

A few seasons ago in Chatham Strait, Karl Jordan, a third-generation Alaska salmon fisherman, came out to watch as I brought up an ashy-lipped, prismatic monster on the troll gear. Forty-five to 50 pounds. Spots on his tail an inky black.

It was the second week of July, the king salmon opener just closed after we had caught our treaty quota.

“Looks like a Columbia River hatchery fish,” Karl said. “Let him go.”



**Brendan Jones** commercial fishes and is the author of the novel “The Alaskan Laundry.”

If Karl was correct — and he usually is when it comes to fishing — that salmon had swum north from Washington’s Columbia River to spend its life in the Gulf of Alaska. When it crossed the border, it weighed perhaps a pound. When it leaves Alaska, it will

weigh up to 70 pounds, muscle enough to sustain it for the journey to the upper reaches of the Columbia.

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In 1985, Idaho, Oregon, Washington, U.S. Tribes, Canada and Alaska came together to create the Pacific Salmon Treaty, an agreement that did its best to portion out these fish that care so little for borders. Alaskans catch Chinook bound for British Columbia. Canadians catch kings returning to the Pacific Northwest as well as Alaska. And Washington fishermen net salmon headed for Canada's Fraser River. It's a beautiful, absurd tangle.

This year, the Pacific Salmon Commission will renegotiate the terms of the labyrinthine treaty, setting up a plan for the next 10 years (2019-2028). Chapter three, which examines king salmon, is by far the most complicated.

But here's the kicker. Since the treaty was enacted, Alaska has lost about 60 percent of its share of salmon, depending on the year, while Washington has gained about 40 percent. The new agreement proposes a further cut of up to 10 percent for all gear classes of Alaska fishermen — sport, commercial and subsistence.

The reasoning behind this? Because 85 percent of the Southeast Alaska Chinook originate from rivers in Canada, Washington and Oregon. So the fish aren't for Alaska fishermen, goes the argument. The fish are "intercepted" on their way back to their native streams.

If they're not Alaskan, what are they doing in Alaska? Do I belong to the state of Colorado, where I was born?

The fact is, salmon could care less about arbitrary political boundaries. What they do know is this: They want food. That means needlefish. Herring. That means cold, clean water. That means oceans where they're not in danger of being fouled by pharmaceutical waste — as happened to juvenile Chinook in Puget Sound. That means Alaska.

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Alaska has outlawed salmon farming, discouraged dams that block salmon passage, banned midwater trawling from Cordova to the Canadian border, and enforced the strongest wild-salmon protection laws and regulations on earth. Protection of these fish is built into our state constitution. We sacrifice significant resource opportunities — timber, mineral, oil — to keep our salmon safe. And we expect our treaty partners to do the same.

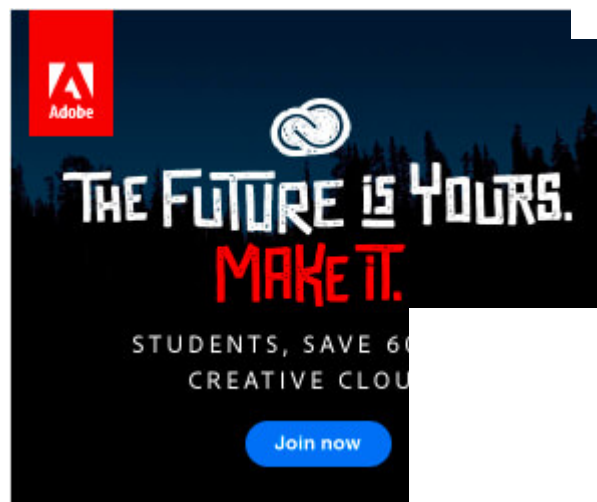
Except they don't. And now they expect us to lose more fish because of it.

Canada unfortunately allows salmon farming. The country also has a dismal record of polluting salmon rivers, including the 2014 Mount Polley disaster, which dumped 24 million cubic meters of heavy-mineral tailings into sockeye habitat. Obstructed freshwater migration paths (culverts, dams), and overdevelopment harm salmon habitat in Washington and Oregon. Clear-cutting, unscreened water withdrawal for irrigation and fertilizer runoff are endangering runs across the Pacific Northwest.

And yet Alaskans are told they need to give up more fish.

The real issue isn't where the fish are from. It's that Alaska salmon fisherfolk have been giving up a disproportionate portion of their harvest — more than 50 percent, at least — to rebuild damaged stocks elsewhere. In addition, Columbia River hatchery treaty fish are hatchery fish — financed by federal tax dollars. Open-ocean trolling catches the salmon when they're in the prime of their lives, rather than right before they spawn, when the meat deteriorates.

Fact is, it's not a good day to be a king-salmon fisherman anywhere. Rising ocean temperatures, low king returns, a 25 percent tariff from China on Alaska salmon — it just keeps getting worse. But we cannot continue to heap pain onto Alaska. Our isolated island communities, like the one where I live, depend on access to the ocean fisheries. Trolling is the lifeblood of Southeast Alaska — roughly one of every 40 people here works on a troll boat. Fishing is the Boeing, Microsoft and Amazon of our economy. When our communities lose the opportunity to fish, we all suffer. This includes those cool bearded dudes playing catch with fish in Pike Place Market.



Up here in Alaska we've done right by our salmon. Now it's time for the Pacific Northwest and Canada to do right by us. Do not take away our fish.

***Brendan Jones***