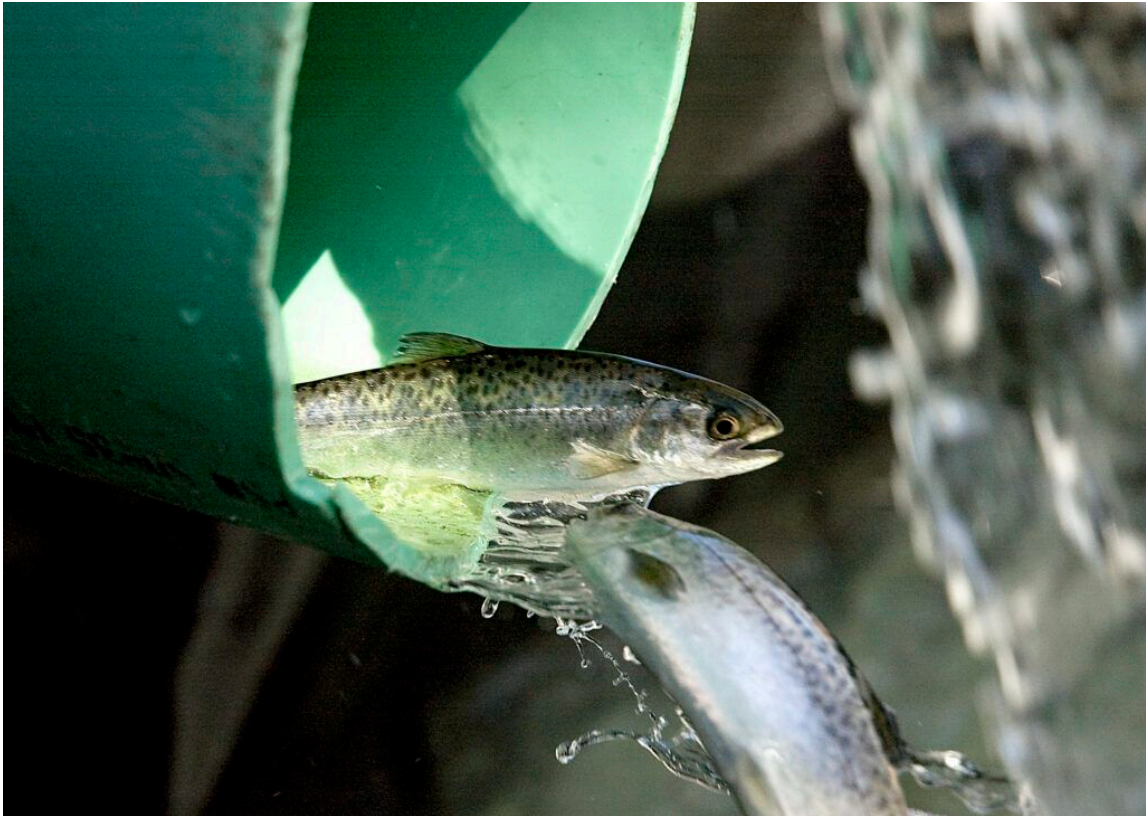


## Funding: Struggling salmon fishermen getting federal help, but it may be too late

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The federal government will dole out disaster relief to commercial Chinook salmon fishermen who have weathered a string of poor seasons on the Oregon Coast. But some fishermen say the help won't be enough to rescue the fast-shrinking industry.

Earlier this month, two years after a request by Oregon's governor, the U.S. Department of Commerce declared a Chinook fishery disaster for 2018, 2019 and 2020, years when local salmon populations plummeted. Fishing regulators blame the drop on poor habitat conditions and climate change near the California-Oregon border, where thousands of Chinook migrate from the ocean up rivers and streams to spawn.

The disaster declaration releases financial assistance for fishermen and possibly for other businesses, along with funding to help restore the fishery and protect future Chinook runs, members of Oregon's congressional delegation said in a statement.

This species of salmon is Oregon's official state fish and is of high cultural value to Northwest tribes. Chinook are also considered a cornerstone of the Oregon Coast economy. Sales of Chinook salmon used to feed thousands of families along the coast, but revenues have plummeted with the decline in the numbers of fish migrating up waterways.

In the 1970s, the heyday for salmon fishing, thousands of commercial boats brought in an average \$35 million per year in Chinook and coho salmon. But revenues later dropped, with Chinook fishermen especially hard hit.

From 2018 to 2020, low numbers of Chinook and restrictions by the Pacific Fishery Management Council drove a hard downturn for fishermen and businesses such as restaurants and markets that sell Oregon-caught wild Chinook. From 2013 to 2017, the total commercial value of salmon caught in Oregon averaged more than \$6 million per year. That steadily dropped to \$1.4 million in 2020 and has only recovered slightly since, according to federal data.

Fish numbers also dropped this summer with federal regulators closing most of the Oregon Coast and all of California to commercial Chinook fishing after projections of "near record-low" returns to the Klamath and Sacramento river basins.

It's not clear yet how much money the federal government will distribute for the disaster. People who are eligible for the federal help will be contacted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration "in the coming weeks," Gov. Tina Kotek said in a statement.

The assistance is "long overdue," Oregon Democratic Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden said in a statement. They were joined by Oregon's Democratic U.S. Reps. Suzanne Bonamici, Earl Blumenauer, Andrea Salinas and Val Hoyle along with Republican Rep. Lori Chavez-DeRemer. The only member of Oregon's delegation not joining the effort was Republican Rep. Cliff Bentz, who represents eastern Oregon.

Fishermen told the Capital Chronicle that they appreciate the assistance but said the relief is coming years too late and likely won't make them whole, they said.

"The powers that be move pretty slowly when it comes to this stuff," said Ray Monroe, a Pacific City dory fisherman. Monroe is a member of the Oregon Salmon Commission, an industry-funded group that's legally part of the state Department of Agriculture.

While the national oceanic agency prepares to distribute the relief, the federal commerce department is also considering a request by Kotek to quickly declare a disaster for this year's closed Chinook season. Former Gov. Kate Brown initially asked for a disaster declaration in 2021.

Chinook salmon have consistently struggled to migrate from California, but some other salmon populations have rebounded in recent years, including federally-protected coho that have been mostly off-limits to commercial fishing for about 15 years.

## **Drivers of disaster**

Chinook fishing off the Oregon Coast is heavily influenced by the health of salmon runs in the Sacramento and Klamath rivers, which have suffered from drought and water overuse that's exacerbated by climate change, scientists say.

Chinook spawn in those rivers and migrate to the Oregon Coast to feed and mature before returning upstream to spawn again. Regulators home in on those fish populations when deciding whether to allow Chinook fishing for most of Oregon, said John North, an assistant fish division administrator with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"If they aren't doing that well, we can't fish," North said.

North said poor river habitat and harsh conditions for salmon in the ocean led to federal regulators' decisions from 2018 to 2020 to limit the number of Chinook salmon that could be caught off most of the Oregon Coast.

However, according to Brown's 2021 request for relief, Chinook fishing never stopped entirely in Oregon waters during those years.

The fishery continues to be plagued by poor salmon runs. In 2021, about 90% of winter-run Chinook died in California's Central Valley before spawning. The federal government had listed Central Valley spring-run Chinook as threatened in 1999, and numbers of returning salmon plummeted enough this fall that state and federal biologists are trapping them for the first time in an effort to save runs from extinction.

### **One of many 'disasters'**

The federal government has declared a slew of fishery disasters for various salmon populations on the West Coast in recent years. North said that's apparently becoming more common.

In addition to the newly-announced disaster and Kotek's request for a Chinook disaster this year, the federal government has declared salmon fishery disasters in Oregon at least four times since 1994, often in tandem with California.

Most recently, the national oceanic agency doled out almost \$9 million to compensate Oregon and California communities affected by a Chinook downturn in 2016 and 2017.

The Oregon Salmon Commission helped coordinate those payments, said Jeff Reeves, a veteran fisherman based near Coos Bay who is the board's chairman. Fishermen, restaurateurs and others received about \$8,000 each, he said. But the money took a few years to arrive, and Reeves said too many checks went to businesses that weren't directly involved in fishing.

"I'm not trying to sound unappreciative, but that was not enough to save the fishermen," Reeves said.

### **Hard times**

Reeves has fished the central Oregon Coast for decades. He said Oregon's Chinook fishing fleet is "on life support": Last year, just 180 boats landed Chinook or coho compared with a peak of 3,900 boats in the late 1970s, federal records show.

And when Chinook numbers are low, the fishermen are often stuck. It's not easy for them to pivot from Chinook "trolling" to fishing for other catch because commercial fishing in general is time-intensive, heavily-regulated and expensive. When regulators restrict salmon catches, fisherman can't afford to upkeep their moored boats; in Coos Bay, they are falling into disrepair or arrears. Some have burned, Reeves said.

"I've seen lots of good people go by the wayside because they had invested in the salmon fishery," he said.

Fishing is the first love of Monroe in Pacific City, but he has had to take other jobs throughout the years, such as cleaning homes and working for a local soil and water conservation district to make ends meet. Like Reeves, he's frustrated with regulators' decisions to close the fishery. He said they're based on shaky projections and puts local communities in "survival mode."

### **Some bright spots**

Other coastal salmon populations are faring better than Klamath and Sacramento-run Chinook, Shaun Clements, the state acting deputy director of fish and wildlife, told a state legislative committee this month.

The national oceanic agency protected Oregon coastal coho in 1998 under the Endangered Species Act. That population may have improved enough to be delisted in the coming years, Clements said.

North said Chinook from the Columbia River returned strong this year. Those fish typically migrate north to Washington and British Columbia.

Oregon commercial fisheries could benefit from loosened protections for coho, as well as a massive dam removal and river restoration project on the Klamath River, which is expected to strengthen salmon runs.

"I just hope there's a few of us left to capitalize on that," Reeves said.

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