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Contact: Brian Gorman, NOAA Fisheries, 206-526-6613
Scott Simms, BPA, 503-230-3520
Michael Coffey, Corps, 503-808-3722
Diana Cross, Reclamation, 208-378-5020

Spring chinook returns to Columbia River maintain healthy numbers

Ocean conditions, hydro system improvements credited with these solid fish returns

PORTLAND, ORE. - In contrast to gloomy news about low fall chinook returns leading to the West Coast salmon-fishing collapse, the one bright spot appears to be in the Pacific Northwest's Columbia Basin. Reports this week from Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River indicate fairly healthy numbers of adult spring chinook heading upriver to spawn.

Columbia River chinook mature in a different part of the Pacific Ocean and are subject to different availability of food and predators than their California-bound cousins.

As of June 15, the official end of the spring chinook season on the Columbia, almost 152,000 adult chinook had been counted at the dam. While this is slightly below the 10-year average from 1998-2007 of about 175,000 fish, it is considerably better than the past three years, which ranged from 126,000 chinook in 2006 to only 81,000 in 2007.

Columbia River spring chinook are protected under the federal Endangered Species Act. In a typical year, about 80 percent of the returning chinook adults consist of salmon that were raised in hatcheries; the remainder come from fish that spawned in the wild.

Additionally, counts at Bonneville Dam of jacks - adult chinook salmon that return to spawn a year earlier than most of their cohort - are very high this year, over 22,000. That is more than twice the 10-year average. Jacks are an indicator of the average strength of the next year's adult returns, although they may not accurately predict the run size for any specific year.

Including adult chinook returning this year, jack counts in the last eight years have under predicted the following year's adult returns four times and over

predicted the return four times.

Recent improvements to the hydroelectric dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers are credited with increased survival of juvenile salmon heading downstream to the Pacific Ocean. Biologists say that ocean conditions will always exercise a powerful influence over the salmon's life cycle.

In that regard, initial surveys by biologists with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) fisheries service show "very productive" ocean conditions north of Newport, Ore.

According to John Ferguson, head of the fish ecology division of NOAA Fisheries in Seattle, that survey, completed late last month, showed, "These are very high numbers of juvenile salmon, some of the highest numbers we've ever seen."

Ferguson said there's a strong correlation between high juvenile catches and good salmon returns in future years. The fish sampled offshore this year include coho that will return next year and spring chinook that will return in 2010.

A graph showing adult chinook counts at Bonneville Dam from 1939 through 2008 is available at www.salmonrecovery.gov/research_reports_pubs/facts_background/

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