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[Main page](#) | [Archive](#)

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California Water Operations Threaten Survival of Iconic Salmon Fishery Fishermen, Seafood Restaurant and Conservationists Call for Improved Water Management in the San Francisco Bay-Delta

SAN FRANCISCO (July 24, 2008) – California salmon could soon disappear permanently from the state’s rivers, restaurant menus and supermarkets if massive water diversions from the San Francisco Bay-Delta continue unabated, according to a new report released today by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Association (PCFFA) and Water 4 Fish.

The report, “[Fish Out of Water: How Water Management in the Bay-Delta Threatens the Future of California’s Salmon Fishery](#),” describes how the State Water Project and Central Valley Project contribute to declining salmon populations, by reducing the availability of water necessary for migration and spawning, killing tens of thousands of juvenile salmon by sucking them into giant pumps used to export water, and blocking salmon’s migration route with their dams. The report comes on the heels of a federal court ruling that water project operations in the Central Valley jeopardize the survival of several salmon runs, and a few months after state and federal agencies closed California’s commercial salmon fishery for the first time ever due to record low numbers of fish returning to spawn.

“The future of California’s salmon fishery is completely dependent on how we manage water in the Bay-Delta ecosystem,” said Doug Obegi, NRDC staff attorney and lead author of the report. “California agencies must implement existing requirements to restore salmon, reform management of the water projects, and reduce water diversions. California can meet its water supply needs and restore salmon and the health of the Delta ecosystem by investing in fish friendly water supply alternatives, including water conservation and recycling. If we do so, Californians will once again be able to enjoy abundant local salmon in their rivers, on their lines, and on their plates.”

Despite the current crisis, the report notes that state and federal agencies are considering actions that could make things even worse for salmon survival. For example, agencies are considering developing a peripheral canal to export even more water from the Bay-Delta. In addition, they have executed water supply contracts that commit more water than the system can sustainably yield. And they have reduced protections for salmon in the new long term plan for operations of the state and federal water projects.

“The collapse of the salmon fishery is among the nation’s worst man-made fishery disasters ever. It is on par with the Exxon Valdez spill or the closure of the New England cod fishery. But we believe that we can bring back our fishery. If we do the right things in managing our waters in the rivers and in the delta, we can save our salmon, and save our birthright,” said Dick Pool, organizer for the Water-4-Fish campaign, which is led by recreational fishermen who seek to reform water management in the state to better protect fish and fisheries.

Millions of Californians fish and are affected by the closure. Fisherman, tackle suppliers, charter boat operators, fish processors and restaurateurs all depend on healthy salmon runs to sustain their livelihoods. The disappearance of the state’s salmon fishery could mean economic ruin for many communities. This year’s closure was estimated to result in economic losses of \$255 million and the loss of more than 2,200 jobs in California.

“Commercial salmon fishermen are paying a heavy price for the poaching of water from the Bay-Delta. The policy of this state is to double salmon populations, not decimate them. We need to reduce delta diversions if we expect to bring back the salmon. The bottom line is, fish need water. If we give them enough water, the salmon – and the salmon fishery – will return,” said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations (PCFFA), which is the largest association of commercial fishermen on the West Coast.

NRDC experts offered recommendations in their report to prevent a permanent fishery collapse including: implementation of California’s existing salmon doubling requirement, reducing water diversions from the Bay-Delta, reforming management of the State Water Project and Central Valley Project, and restoring salmon to the San Joaquin River.

The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, nonprofit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has 1.2 million members and online activists, served from offices in New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Beijing.

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