

## Statement of Bob Borck, Eureka California commercial salmon, crab and blackcod fisherman

**Before the Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Water, Power and Oceans  
United States House of Representatives**

### **Changing Demands and Water Supply Uncertainty in California**

July 12, 2016

Good morning Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee. I'm Bob Borck, skipper of the fishing vessel Belle J II. I fish salmon, crab and black cod commercially out of Eureka in northern California. I've come here today so you can hear from the coast.

Our salmon fishery is in trouble and let me start by reminding you all that salmon spend part of their lives in California's rivers and streams, where they're born and die, and part of their lives in the ocean. I'm here to report to you that the ocean is doing its part for salmon. The problems confronting California salmon are all caused by manmade changes to California's rivers, streams, and Bay Delta. Biggest among these is lack of river flows to the sea in the spring which are needed to deliver baby salmon to the ocean.

We rely on Central Valley fall run king salmon which are fished from Santa Barbara to Washington. These fish come from the Sacramento River, the source of much of the water at issue today. We are blessed to have these fish and so are our consumers, who snap them up as soon as we bring them to port.

These fish are the cornerstone of 23,000 jobs in CA and 11,000 in OR in a "normal" non-drought year. The industry serving both sport and commercial salmon generates about \$1.4 billion in economic activity by the time you add in all the multipliers and about half that much again in jobs and dollars in Oregon where as much as 60 percent of their ocean caught salmon originate in California's Central Valley.<sup>1</sup>

But we haven't had a really good salmon season since 2013. I think it's informative to consider what gave us a good season in that year since it highlights what's hurting us now. The good 2013 season was fueled by two things:

- a) strong new salmon protections coming out of the Endangered Species Act's 2009 salmon biological opinion and
- b) a wet winter and spring in 2010/11

The 2009 ESA protections gave us a break from the crushing diversion of salmon water from the Bay Delta we experienced prior to 09. It finally gave baby salmon a little water to make it to the ocean. Spring runoff from the Central Valley functions like a conveyor belt that carries baby salmon downstream from where they were born and out to the ocean. They **are poor swimmers** and need

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<sup>1</sup> <http://asafishing.org/newsroom/news-releases/economic-data-supports-efforts-to-recover-californias-salmon-fisheries/>

strong spring river flows to the ocean to survive. When this water is diverted in the Delta, the conveyor belt carrying these baby salmon is cut and they die.

The massive volumes of water diverted from the Bay Delta prior to 2009 coincided with the first ever total shut down of ocean salmon fishing in California in 08 and 09.<sup>2</sup> Salmon born in years that saw all time high water diversions from the Bay Delta basically failed to survive and return as adults two years later.

The 2008 and 2009 shutdown was a desperate time for the salmon industry. We had to resort to federal disaster relief to get through the closure, which is no way to run a business. We're not looking for a handout. We want a fishery.

This year, we're staring down some of the slimmest fishing opportunity since the 2008-09 closure because of low salmon production in California's rivers, caused by drought and water diversions.

Low forecasts salmon abundance and problems with the Bureau of Reclamation's management of cold water at Shasta dam for the last two years forced the Pacific Fishery Management Council to severely restrict our time on the ocean this year. In the southern half of California, those fleets only got two months to fish in what used to be the April-October salmon season. Right now we're shut down, statewide, for the entire month of July, which is usually one of our most productive times to fish.

Today, as I sit here, I and all virtually all California and Oregon salmon/crab fishermen are reeling from brutal back to back to back fishing seasons. 2015's salmon harvest was significantly lower than projected. We had to delay the 2015-16 Dungeness crab season for concerns over domoic acid. The delay cost us our best markets and weather windows to fish.

When fishing was on, it was poor, as expected. Jeff French, a fisherman in Morro Bay, CA, landed only 5 salmon over 4 fishing trips during the two month span this year. His salmon season is over. He'll be forced to fall back on rock crab, a much less lucrative fishery, until the Dungeness crab season starts back up in September.

And it's not just the southern part that's suffered poor fishing this year. Sarah Bates, a San Francisco fisherwoman recently returned from a three-day trip with only eight salmon. This is not normal, and not for lack of effort.

Baby salmon, at a year of age, make it to sea in large numbers riding that heavy rain runoff. In addition to giving them a ride, the runoff also gives them camouflage in muddy water turbidity. This effectively "cloaks" the baby salmon, making them invisible to predatory fish that would eat them. I know many of you believe predator fish are the main cause of salmon decline but I'm here to tell you it's the lack of camouflage in the form of muddy runoff that makes baby salmon vulnerable to predators in the rivers and Delta.

So contrary to what we've seen reported from some that know nothing about salmon or the ecological function of the Bay Delta, water flowing to the sea is not wasted! The most obvious evidence of this is

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dailydemocrat.com/general-news/20090119/weak-oversight-brought-us-to-depleted-delta>

the good fishing seasons we always get two years after heavy rains. The heavy rain runoff mimics pre-dam natural runoff patterns that salmon evolved to thrive in.

There's a good example of the value of spring flows to salmon in the Columbia River basin. After years of court battles, like those we have here in California, a federal judge in 2005 ordered reservoir managers up there to release water to flush baby salmon in the spring.

The results have been dramatic, with probably the greatest recovery of west coast salmon in history. The last few years have seen modern record returns of salmon to the Columbia River which has provided a great economic boost to that region.

I'd like to speak a little more on the make up of the salmon industry. Most of us fishermen make a living family wage in good years. We're not getting rich, but we can save a little and get ahead after really wet years when we always get a bump in salmon numbers. Lately, we've been getting poor and spending the last of our savings, in large part, due to depressed salmon numbers caused by lack of freshwater for those fish in the Central Valley.

People flock to the coast to catch a salmon when fishing is good. They come from hundreds of miles and bring their wallets with them. Word of a hot salmon bite is akin to word of a gold strike 150 years ago. It gets people moving in the direction of the salmon.

Our boats benefit from new equipment and updated maintenance after a good season. The opposite is also true. Maintenance is deferred and we're stuck with patched up gear after poor seasons and as you can imagine, this can lead to less than safe working conditions for us.

Businesses that rely on both sport and commercial salmon include places like Englund Marine, a chain of stores supplying fishing and boating needs in California and Oregon. We've got one in Eureka and it does well when salmon are doing well.

The salmon industry also fuels many west coast machine shops, boat yards and boat dealerships, tackle and gear stores, seafood buyers, local hotels and restaurants, and ports and harbors. They all benefit when salmon fishermen are in town and they all suffer when salmon numbers are low.

But we're already seeing a decline in our salmon industry, as critical fishing infrastructure like fuel and ice docks have begun to disappear from harbors in quintessential ports like Monterey and Santa Cruz.

This industry is vitally important to rural California where most of our harbors exist. It's vital to the many thousands of families that rely on salmon for their livelihoods. It's vital to the cultural fabric of our coastal communities.

I want to leave you with the understanding that federal protections for salmon under the Endangered Species Act are the only reason we in California are still on the water fishing. They are the only reason we still have any salmon in California rivers. Without ESA salmon protections we lose all of our Central Valley wild salmon runs, and in all likelihood, the salmon industry. It's important to understand that although ESA salmon protections are geared to two of the four king salmon runs in the Central Valley, the other two, which we rely on, also greatly benefit from these ESA protections. This is why the west coast salmon fleet supports the ESA.

State and federal fish agencies tell us we lost between 95 and 98 percent of our Central Valley salmon during the last two drought years. The eggs didn't hatch because river water released from reservoirs was too warm. We don't manage the reservoirs, and we didn't cause that wipe out. But we're doing our part by limiting the number of fish we catch, to make sure that we have a fishery into the future. I ask that you do your part to make sure that California's water resources are allocated in a way that's equitable and protective of all of California's industries.

We've got fishing families in Crescent City, Eureka, Fort Bragg, Bodega Bay, San Francisco Bay, throughout Monterey Bay and beyond whose futures are hanging in the balance. They've been practicing a sustainable lifestyle in harmony with our natural systems for decades and providing one of the most incredible foods known to man.

We've got an incredible ocean off the most beautiful coast in the nation that's short on a key resource needed not only by us humans, but also many other species that need salmon. I appeal to each of you to act for the long term benefit of the great state we call home and that means leaving enough water in our salmon rivers for salmon to survive. Thank you.