

Spring Chinook Salmon 'Rescued' from Butte Creek

by Dan Bacher

State and federal fisheries staff arrived at Butte Creek on Thursday, July 15, expecting to capture and transport 75-80 spring run Chinook salmon stranded in the tributary of the Sacramento River, but they actually captured and relocated 123 of these majestic native fish.

This "rescue" has become an annual ritual that takes place when these salmon are threatened by rising water temperatures during their annual migration. Over the past decade, two major fish kills took place on the creek, due to mismanagement by the state and federal governments and PG&E.

Fishermen and environmentalists pointed out that the warm water temperatures that every summer plague the creek are spurred by upstream diversions - and that the agency staff had waited too long to "rescue" the fish for their efforts to be successful.

"The salmon, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, had stopped their migratory journey through the lower reach of the river because of rising water temperatures," according to a news release from the DFG. "The Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) combined efforts to rescue the fish."

Staff netted the salmon, implanted radio transmitters in 22 of them and moved them upstream to cooler water, so they can continue their spawning migration.

"Due to the extremely low number of returning fish this year to Butte Creek, every fish is important," said Joe Johnson, DFG Fisheries Supervisor. "We didn't expect to find 123 fish, but we were prepared. We tagged all of them and place radio transmitters in two groups of fish in two areas. We want to find out how many of these stranded salmon will survive to spawn, and what the results are for this type of rescue."

Snorkel surveys conducted at the end of June only recorded 300 salmon in this area, instead of an expected 3,000 to 5,000. "A variety of factors may have delayed or altered the normal migration timing and pattern, including a late spring and cold high flows out of the Yuba River," Johnson said.

"The water in the Butte Creek pool where the fish were stranded is significantly warmer than the rest of the river, creating a thermal block that causes the migrating salmon to dive to the bottom in search of cooler waters," the release continued. "As long as the water remains warm, the fish will not move forward. This particular spot on the river has been a trouble spot for spring run salmon in previous years."

While the DFG staff claimed this was a "successful" rescue, Allen Harthorn, executive director of Friends of Butte Creek, disagrees.

"It is amazing how they can act like this is a success when they ultimately lose almost all the rescued fish because they waited too long," said Harthorn.

He also emphasized that the warm water temperatures requiring the rescue were spurred by upstream agricultural water diversions.

"There are two agricultural diverters upstream," said Harthorn, "and the DFG also diverts water for wildlife refuges at the upper dam. Eighty percent of the water is being taken out upstream. Does anyone think that might be related to the warmer water temperatures? This is getting to be ridiculous."

The DFG staff and NOAA biologists set seine nets to capture the stranded salmon. Biologists then used dip nets to capture fish out of the larger seine net and place them in a net pen.

Each fish, some of whom weighed up to 30 pounds, was carefully moved from the net pen in dip nets by a line of workers to transfer the fish up a steep bank. The fish were then loaded into a hatchery truck and transported up river for release, thus moving them around the warm water thermal block.

This year, for the second time, DFG, NOAA and staff from the University of California, Davis implanted a percentage of the rescued salmon with radio tracking devices, while the rest were tagged with small, external colored tags. The trackers will enable biologists to monitor how rescued fish behave after being rescued and if they contribute to the overall salmon population.

"Butte Creek's spring run Chinook salmon have been listed as a threatened species since 1999," according to the DFG. "More than \$35 million has been spent by state, federal and private parties on restoration and recovery efforts on the watershed. Over the past decade, changes in habitat and water management have helped the population rebound somewhat, but Central Valley salmon populations can still vary significantly from year to year."

The DFG noted that the run has averaged 6,000 fish over the past 10 years, "but recent surveys indicate a much lower salmon return."

"We have a very small run so far on Butte Creek," added Harthorn. "It looks like it will be less than last year's precipitous drop from 11,000 in '08 to 2561 in '09. The trend does not look good."

The "rescue" of stranded spring Chinook salmon on Butte Creek occurs as populations of Central Valley steelhead, Sacramento River Chinook salmon, Delta smelt, longfin smelt and striped bass continue to collapse. Although water pollution, invasive species, toxic chemicals and other factors play a role in the collapse, the most significant factor in the decline of these species is massive exports of water from the California Delta to corporate agribusiness and southern California.

Meanwhile, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Senator Dianne Feinstein, the Legislative leadership, corporate agribusiness and southern California water agencies are pushing for the construction of the peripheral canal and new dams. The peripheral canal, a \$23 to \$53.8 billion government boondoggle, is likely to result in the extinction of Central Valley Chinook salmon, Delta smelt and other species.