

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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AGENTS CONFISCATE 16 TONS OF SALMON ILLEGALLY SOLD FROM KLAMATH RIVER

Almost 16 tons of Chinook salmon sold illegally after being taken from the Klamath River, where spawning runs of the species are dangerously low, have been seized over the last three weeks by special agents of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Secretary of the Interior Cecil D. Andrus announced today.

"Federal and State enforcement agents have uncovered massive, illegal operations involving fish from the Klamath--an activity which in conjunction with heavy ocean fishing threatens not only future runs of the species, but the future livelihood of both Indian and non-Indian commercial and sport fishermen," Andrus said.

All of the fish confiscated are believed to have come from the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation in northern California where subsistence fishing is allowed, but commercial fishing has been prohibited this year. Andrus personally inspected the Klamath situation last year.

Commercial ocean fishing which is not under the control of Interior has continued basically unchanged. Information from the State of California indicates that approximately 5.5 million pounds have been taken from the ocean this year in comparison with 5.2 million pounds last year. Considering the success of this year's offshore salmon fishery, Interior officials expressed hope that the State of California would join with the Department in its present efforts to protect the runs by closing the offshore salmon fishery for the remainder of this month.

"The Department's efforts to save the Chinook's spawning runs by cracking down on extensive illegal sales of subsistence fishing will bear little fruit in the long run if commercial offshore harvests continue to increase each year," Andrus said.

"The 16 tons of fish seized in the illegal sales, while significant, is more than offset by the additional 150 tons harvested legally offshore this season," he said.

Because the drought of 1975-76 seriously affected fish runs from California to Alaska, Interior officials banned commercial fishing in the river.

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Fish and Wildlife Service enforcement officials believe that the recent seizures represent only a tiny part of the operation and expect that additional arrests and apprehensions will be made in as many as five States in the near future. These cases are the result of intensified criminal investigative efforts begun by the Fish and Wildlife Service earlier this year.

"The scope and magnitude of the illegal activity is surprising to us, especially this early in the fall run," Galen Buterbaugh, Associate Director of Fishery Resources for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said. "We knew that this year's run was going to be quite low anyway, but we fear the scope of illegal fishing when combined with the fish being harvested by ocean fishermen, may have an impact on the salmon runs three, four, and five years from now."

The seizures began on August 13 in Reno, Nevada, when David G. Patterson, 50, of Klamath, California, allegedly sold 1,000 pounds of salmon to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service undercover agent. On August 23, another 10,500 pounds of salmon were seized by California Fish and Game wardens in San Francisco. About 4,000 additional pounds of fish were confiscated by wardens from an individual near Eureka on August 24. California wardens and Service special agents confiscated 9,000 pounds of fish from a cold storage facility in San Francisco on August 27.

On August 31, Service agents arrested Patterson, Ronald G. Webster, 38, and his wife, Jacqueline, 30, both of Klamath, after they allegedly sold more than 6,700 pounds of salmon to another undercover agent in Reno.

Patterson has been charged with two counts each of violating the Black Bass Act and for conspiracy. The Websters were each charged with a violation of the Black Bass Act and conspiracy. The Black Bass Act prohibits the sale or transportation of fish taken in violation of State law. Trucks registered to Patterson and the Websters which were used in the operation were also confiscated. All three individuals will be arraigned September 13 in U.S. District Court in Reno.

Charges against other individuals suspected of being involved with the other seizures have not yet been filed.

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