

# REVERSALS OF FORTUNE

## SALMON FISHERMEN CATCH FINANCIAL RUIN



by Courtland L. Smith

In 1994, the plight of salmon and salmon fishermen moved from the sports page to the front page. After several years of declining returns of wild coho salmon, the coho salmon season had been closed and Congress had declared a natural disaster. This declaration enabled Congress to provide relief for distressed and displaced fishermen in a climate of government fiscal restraint.

Disaster-relief unemployment insurance was one of five programs designed to help those who fished commercially for coho salmon through the 1994 closure. The five programs provided \$10 million for Oregon's trollers and gillnetters. The immediate problem for disaster-relief planners was identifying which salmon fishermen should get assistance. After the dust settled many people were surprised by the attitude of those who received help. The dissatisfaction and the hardship created by 90 percent

declines in the fisheries revenues can best be understood by taking a look at the history of the people who, in 1994, made a living fishing for salmon in Oregon.

Most were men in their fifties with high school diplomas and some college. Those in the ocean-troll fishery could troll for chinook, which returned to coastal streams. Gillnetters were much more affected by salmon declines, because they depended on salmon returning to the Columbia River. Almost a fifth of their families had been gillnetting for salmon for four generations and had supplied

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the Columbia River canned-salmon industry, which began in the 1860s. Marketing canned salmon to the British Empire was Oregon's first major venture into international trade and produced many nineteenth-century canner millionaires. After World War II and into the 1980s, salmon fishermen made a good income trolling or gillnetting for salmon.

As the salmon resource declined, seasons shortened, and fishing areas were closed. In the 1970s, two-thirds of the troll fleet was made up of "part-timers." Columbia River salmon canning was gone by 1975, but the gillnetters continued selling to the fresh and frozen markets. Abundant salmon landings in Alaska lowered prices. "Professional" fishermen branched out into other fisheries, mainly crabbing in spring and trolling for albacore in late summer. By the 1990s, being a professional fisherman meant branching out even more. Some fishermen took non-fishing jobs in construction, other marine activities, and habitat restoration. In the allocation of disaster relief funds, this worked against them. Mixed in with the part-timers were teachers and truck drivers who fished during off periods and others who saw commercial fishing as a way to catch more fish than recreation limits allowed. By 1996, half of the trollers no longer identified themselves as commercial fishermen. Because the salmon decline

took a century in the case of Columbia River gillnetting and more than twenty years for trolling, salmon fishermen did not see the decline as a short-term disaster.

Most, like resource managers and disaster relief planners, saw the "disaster" as a "fish" problem, and 95 percent felt habitat was the key to salmon restoration. Everyone felt that the fisheries had not been managed properly by the government. One fisherman said, "Failing on my own is one thing; failing because someone is destroying [my] business is different."

The majority of those who received relief in 1995 had identified themselves as professional fishermen. Thirteen percent of those who did not also received relief and were among those who some thought did not deserve it. Two-thirds of those who received relief felt they did not get what they needed.

Why did the efforts of government fail to meet the expectations of trollers and gillnetters? The salmon decline was also a family problem. Although for some, "The idea of accepting welfare [was] appalling," or they "never had any help and [did not] want any," others desired and needed help. In a normal year, two-thirds of gillnetters and three-quarters of salmon trollers said they earned more than 20 percent of their income from salmon fishing.

In 1994, only one in ten gillnetters and one in five trollers could make that claim. People with families could not take the 10-20 percent cut in income. Low social security payments for fishermen complicated the

issue. For those with families and whose bodies had been beaten up in logging and forced to retire at 50, salmon fishing could be a necessary part time occupation. Another obstacle for people was the detailed documentation required by the government application for relief—many in the fishing industry traditionally eschew government.

Many fishing families could not be helped because programs targeted fishermen and not their families. Some felt that programs should have been crafted to support families in accordance with the philosophy of Republicans who were calling for reform in Congress. Reform that also meant reductions in benefits and programs. Trollers and gillnetters were sure that society owed them more than just short-term compensation trumped up as disaster relief.

One salmon fisherman summarized the problem: "All aspects of society that negatively impact salmon should equally share in the burden of restoration, including agriculture, ranching, logging, urban and industrial development, dams, aluminum smelters, nuclear power, pollution (both point and non-point), roads and highways, and, yes, even fishing (sport, commercial and Indian). What society has done is make a few pay for the past sins of all."

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Photo courtesy of Court Smith and the Oregon Sea Grant