

What's next for salmon disaster relief?

Complicated process ahead

By NICK BOWMAN
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An Alaska salmon fishery was last approved for federal disaster relief in 2011 after a request from former Gov. Sean Parnell.

His successor, Gov. Bill Walker, this week added Southeast Alaska to his September aid request for pink salmon fisheries along Alaska's southern coast.

Pink salmon runs throughout the state hit 20-year lows this year, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

In Southeast, the Ketchikan area fared better than most of the region, but still saw a huge drop in its pink catch.

Including only standard fisheries in Districts 1, 2 and 4, seiners in southern Southeast caught approximately 12 million pink salmon in 2016, according to Scott Walker, Ketchikan area management biologist for Fish and Game.

Both the 10- and 20-year averages of catches in the area are almost 19 million fish, he said.

In 2014, the parent year for 2016, seiners caught 26 million pinks in southern Southeast. Pink salmon are a two-year fish, meaning the children of fish spawning this year will return in 2018.

Big parent years don't necessarily lead to equally large runs two years later, but large runs mean Southeast surpassed its 2014 escapement for pink salmon, leading fishermen and managers to wonder whether there's something happening in the Gulf of Alaska affecting ocean survival rates of salmon.

With back-to-back poor returns for Southeast and a drop in millions of dollars in income for fishermen, area lawmakers requested Walker add Southeast to his declaration.

In his letter granting the request to include Southeast, Walker noted that fishing income had dropped 36 per-



Salmon swim up the Ketchikan Creek on Aug. 11, 2014. A 36-percent drop in commercial fishing income during the 2016 season prompted Gov. Bill Walker to add Southeast Alaska to his pink salmon disaster declaration. The declaration, if approved by the federal government, would open federal aid to fishermen, processors and even fishing-dependent communities.

Staff file photo by Taylor Balkom

cent in 2016 compared to five-year averages.

Before Walker, Parnell joined with the Alaska Federation of Natives to request aid for traditional chinook salmon fisheries in the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers and Cook Inlet.

He requested and received aid for chinook in 2011 and in 2009. The U.S. Department of Commerce granted more than \$25 million in relief in the two years, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The National Marine Fisheries Service receives all requests for aid and is a bureau within NOAA. The

secretary of commerce, Penny Pritzker, and NOAA together decide whether relief is needed, according to NOAA's Juneau-based spokeswoman Julie Speegle.

The funding is appropriated by Congress, and the process is dictated by the Magnuson-Stevens Act. There's no set timeline on when the secretary decides whether to grant requests for relief.

If aid is granted after Walker's requests, commercial fishermen, processors and even fishing-dependent communities would be eligible for relief from the federal government, according to Speegle.

Commercial fishermen and others affected by a disaster with "demonstrable losses attributed to a fisheries failure" would be eligible for direct payments, Speegle said.

If Walker's request is approved, it would likely be between 90 and 120 days before funding arrives in Southeast.

Speegle said the NMFS gets "numerous" requests each year from throughout the United States, and not all requests are approved. The Aleutians East Borough has submitted several requests for relief that have been denied by the bureau.

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