

Increase Ten-Fold in 20 Years—

Rising Japanese Salmon Catches Serious Threat to Alaska Harvest

JUNEAU—Increased Japanese catches of king salmon from Western Alaska rivers and streams pose a serious threat to the stocks of these important fisheries, James W. Brooks, Commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game, said recently.

King salmon catches by the Japanese high seas fishery in the North Pacific and Bering Sea have increased dramatically in recent years," Brooks said.

"Reports recently submitted by state and federal biologists show that the Japanese have taken as many as 685,000 king salmon from that area in a single fishing season and that most of these fish come from Alaskan streams," he added.

"In fact," Brooks said, "the Japanese high seas harvest of king salmon in the Bering Sea in 1969 and 1970 was larger than the U.S. catch in Western Alaska for the same years."

He cited the following as evidence of the increasing pressure which the Japanese are putting on the king salmon stocks of Western Alaska:

1 — The total Japanese mothership catch of king salmon has increased almost five-fold from the 69,000 taken annually from 1952-63 to 305,000 taken annually from 1964 to 1972.

2 — The Bering Sea portion of the catch has increased about ten-fold, from 24,000 annually in 1952-63 to 226,000 annually in 1964-72.

3 — During the period 1968-70 from 76 to 93 per cent of all king salmon taken by the Japanese mothership fleet were taken in the Bering Sea.

Brooks cited scientific studies that show that most of the king salmon caught by the Japanese in the Bering Sea come from Alaskan streams.

Small numbers of king salmon have been tagged and released throughout the high seas fished by the mothership fleet. The few mainland recoveries made have all been in North America where the fish were found from the Columbia River north to the Yukon River.

A majority of the recoveries were made in Western Alaska streams — the Nushagak, Togiak, Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers — from tagging conducted in the central Bering Sea where the largest catches have been recorded by the mothership fleet.

In order to obtain additional information regarding the continental origin of Bering Sea king salmon, scientists of the National Marine Fisheries Service have

been studying differences in growth patterns exhibited by scales of North American and Asian stocks.

Their findings indicate that the majority of king salmon captured by the Japanese in the Bering Sea are of Western Alaska origin. They also show that Western Alaska kings are found throughout the mothership fishing area in the Bering Sea, including waters immediately off the coast of Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula.

From 70 to 90 per cent of the kings captured by the mothership fleet are immature and would normally continue to feed and grow in the ocean for another one to four years before returning to spawn in their streams of origin.

Kings taken in the high seas fishery average 5-6 pounds while mature kings taken by commercial fishermen in Western Alaska weigh from 20 to 23 pounds. The small, immature fish are selectively captured by the small-meshed gill nets used by the Japanese to capture the more abundant sockeye and chum salmon.

Fishermen in Western Alaska, primarily Eskimos and Indians, are highly dependent on salmon for food and as a means of supplementing their incomes.

During the last seven years, the commercial and subsistence king salmon harvest averaged 323,000 fish per year which represents 53 per cent of Alaska's total king catch.

The major fisheries in Western Alaska are located in the Nushagak district in Bristol Bay and in the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers.

Catches made in this region during the past two years were below average — 291,000 in 1972 and 238,000 in 1973. The 1973 catch and estimated return were the smallest since 1960. While this decline may not be totally attributable to the Japanese high seas fishery, it was surely a contributing factor, Brooks said.

Japan's production of king salmon is nil and its high seas fishery is dependent totally on production from streams of other countries, notably the United States.

The taking of immature fish of intermingled stocks on the high seas is contrary to good conservation principles. With the worldwide need for protein, commercial fishing practices which do not maximize yield on a sustained basis must be strongly discouraged, Brooks said.