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Advocates say Berryessa fisheries at risk; state says not true

By Todd R. Hansen | May 6, 2017

LAKE BERRYESSA — Advocates of the Lake Berryessa salmon and trout fisheries said the state is killing off those populations by diverting the number of fish traditionally planted there to other lakes.

“They (state Fish and Wildlife officials) are misappropriating our resources,” said Cameron Smith, known as Captain Cam, who is a Vallejo native and Benicia resident. “I started up my (fishing) roots with my grandfather and father at Lake Berryessa when I was 6 months old.”

Smith said what was once a healthy fish planting program of about 300,000 kokanee salmon, California king salmon and trout has been severely reduced and puts the lake’s fisheries at serious risk.

Eric Larson, the environmental program manager for the Bay-Delta Region of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the planting operations at Lake Berryessa have not changed, and 50,000 kokanee salmon will be added to the lake sometime this month.

He said Berryessa typically gets more fish than any other lake in the 13-county Bay-Delta region, and often the most in all of Northern California. Trout planting began in April and will continue through May, with a total of 14,000 pounds of fish being added to the lake. A fall planting is also scheduled, Larson said.

However, there will be no king salmon planted because the source of those fish – the Klamath Fish Hatchery on the Klamath River in Oregon – is limiting production to ocean-going fish rather than any inland salmon. The same was true last year, Larson said.

Larson said all programs are affected by the number of young fish available for planting. He said numbers have declined over the years because of funding and other influences. In-state trout production, as another example, was reduced by 20 percent four years ago, and 50 percent five years ago.

According to information on the Kokanee Power website, there were 178,360 California king salmon planted in the lake in 2015, but none in 2016 as Larson confirmed. Similarly, the (sockeye) kokanee plant reached a peak of 102,606 in 2010, fell to about 24,000 in 2015 and climbed to 50,111 last year.

Larson said the state gets most of its kokanee stock from out of state, and those sources have been reduced as well.

Smith said he contacted the department several years ago about his concerns.

“Four years ago, we first started seeing the fisheries disappearing . . . and seeing the system collapse,” Smith said.

When things did not get any better the next year, he contacted the state about his concerns. Smith said there was no response.

Eventually, Smith said, a state official told him that the salmon planting – and particularly the kokanee numbers – were being reduced at Lake Berryessa as part of a strategy to create a fishery with larger, trophy-sized fish. If fewer fish were planted, they claimed, those that are in the lake will grow larger.

“That is good and dandy on paper, but they have no evidence this would work or has ever been tried before,” Smith said.

The former commercial salmon fisherman and ocean charter guide said the new strategy is nothing more than a cover for favoring groups like Kokanee Power, which Smith said prefers having the fish planted at other inland waters in their areas.

Larson said state officials are aware of Smith and the other advocates and said they have provided information to them. Furthermore, Larson said the state does have data, from fishing tournaments and other sources, that support the success of such a trophy-fish strategy.

Kokanee Power was formed in 1998, nine years after the state stopped its kokanee program.

“Our efforts focus on the kokanee and Chinook salmon programs in the inland waters of California. Our primary program is assisting the California Department of Fish and Wildlife in (its) ongoing efforts to maintain viable populations of these fish in public waters,” the group’s website states.

“We also offer cooperation and support to other private and public organizations with similar goals, strive to encourage public awareness and support for kokanee and Chinook salmon fisheries, and promote fishing as a family activity.”

Larson said he is not aware of any agreement with Kokanee Power or any other group that

favors planting priorities.

Smith said the Berryessa situation is exasperated by the recent drought, which saw the bass populations at Berryessa increase, and therefore the level of predation on the salmon and trout increase.

He noted that Bassmaster ranks Lake Berryessa as the seventh best bass lake in the nation, jumping from 37th in 2015 after not even being ranked at all in 2012.

Smith said it is critical that both salmon species and trout be planted so no single species is targeted by the bass to the population's detriment.

"It takes three years for (salmon) to reach catchable size, and if we don't get the planting this year, and I don't think we will, you are talking six or seven years," Smith said.

Larson confirmed that the drought had an impact on the lake fisheries, largely because trout and salmon are colder water species, while bass do better in the warmer water.

"But now the lake is full, you will start to see things return to normal," Larson said.

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