Media Contact:
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The Department of the Interior, seeking to restore a once-outstanding salmon and steelhead fishery on the Lower Klamath and Trinity Rivers in California, announced today it would closely regulate Indian commercial and subsistence fishing this summer while undertaking “significant” studies aimed at improving the fish resources.

Both rivers flow through the Hoopa Indian Reservation, where regulation and enforcement of commercial and subsistence fishing has been admittedly ineffective.

The Klamath, which rises in Oregon and empties into the Pacific about 50 miles north of Eureka , is heavily fished by both Indians and sportsmen. The Trinity is one of its tributaries, but most of its waters have been diverted reducing stream flows ad fish runs.

"The new Federal regulations, to take effect July 15, will substantially reduce the impact of Indian fishing from the levels of the past several years,” Under Secretary of the Interior James A. Joseph said.

"But fishing by Indians constitutes only a part of the pressure on the Klamath and the Trinity and we need to assess the other factors as accurately as possible. We have tried but failed to obtain State consent to a cooperative regulatory system, but we will go as far as we can," Joseph said.

“In addition, we expect the State of California will actively enforce creel limits on sport fishermen. Both State and Federal fishery biologists plan studies of the salmon and steelhead populations this year to provide more accurate data as a basis for future regulations."

Indians will continue to be eligible for subsistence fishing throughout most of the year, subject --as are all fishermen-- to basic gear restrictions, in-season adjustments and emergency closures to allow proper spawning escapement, Joseph said. Key points in the regulations--to take effect as interim rules on July 15, with public comments invited--will include.

--An Indian commercial fishing season for fall chinook salmon on the Klamath from July 15 to September 10;

--Four nights of fishing per week during that season on the Klamath from the Highway 101 bridge to the up-river end of the Reservation, and on that part(of the Trinity lying wit in the Reservation;

--Limitation of Indian fishing from the Highway 101 bridge to the mouth of the Klamath to two night per week, to permit effective studies and assure conservation during the fall chinook run.

Federal enforcement agents led by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service will actively enforce all regulations this year, the Under Secretary said.

''We undertake this action reluctantly," he added. ''We do not enjoy cutting back on anyone's fishing but we have to consider both the state of the fishery and Interior's trust responsibility to the Indians now and tomorrow."

Joseph expressed keen disappointment that Interior had been unable thus far to reach agreement with California State officials on a cooperative regulatory system for fishing throughout the Klamath and Trinity. "They agreed strong action was required, but when we got down to specifics there was indecision, hesitation, and refusal," he said.

He noted that Indians of the Hoopa Reservation have Federally-reserved fishing rights on their reservation including commercial and subsistence fishing. Ordinarily, regulation of fishing on reservations is the responsibility of the tribal government, and Federal intervention is unusual. On the Hoopa Reservation however, 18 years of internal court battles have left the Indians without a tribe government structure capable of uniform regulation throughout the Reservation. Tribal regulation will be resumed once the court issues are resolved and tribal government questions are answered, Joseph said.

''Meanwhile, we cannot wait," said the Under Secretary. "The fall chinook run is imminent and we have to take what action we can to give the fish a chance to recover and make an intensive study of this year's remaining runs."

Once world-renown, the fish runs of the two rivers have declined seriously from their historical levels. Major blame is generally assigned to dams and water diversions, but other factors include inadequate land management, logging practices, intensive exploitation of ocean fisheries, and drought conditions during recent years.

The Under Secretary said this year's studies will address those issues as well as planning for enhancement of conditions to improve future fish runs.