

Bristol Bay Commercial Fishing

The World's Last Best Place for Wild Salmon

If Alaska were a nation, it would place 9th among seafood producing countries. Forty-two percent of the world's harvest of wild salmon and 80 percent of the production of high value wild salmon species such as sockeye, king and coho salmon, are from Alaska. Salmon is the most valuable commercial fish managed by the state of Alaska and Bristol Bay is Alaska's richest commercial fishery, accounting for 40 percent of the nation's catch. In Bristol Bay alone, 2008 harvest of all salmon species was approximately 29.3 million fish, and the preliminary exvessel value of the 2008 commercial catch was approximately \$113.3 million. Nearly one-third of all of Alaska's salmon harvest earnings came from Bristol Bay.¹

All five species of Pacific salmon return to Bristol Bay to spawn in its rivers, including pink, chum, sockeye, coho and king. The waters of the region have long been an integral part of the state and local economies, providing thousands of sustainable jobs to Alaskans for generations. Bristol Bay's economy has a seasonal boom with more than five times as many jobs in the summer than in the winter. Each summer, thousands of people find work either on the water or in canneries, processing the millions of pounds of salmon that return each year.

Commercial fishing-related jobs account for nearly 75 percent of local jobs, with an annual payroll for employment based on fish and wildlife of \$175 million.² Commercial fishing and the associated canneries have been the major industries in the area for years. This year residents will mark commercial fishing's 125th anniversary in Bristol Bay.

The Bristol Bay commercial fisheries management area includes eight major river systems: Naknek, Kvichak, Egegig, Ugashik, Wood, Nushagak, Igushik and Togiak. The Kvichak River, which runs from Lake Iliamna (the largest freshwater body in Alaska) to Bristol Bay, is home to the single largest salmon run on the planet. The Nushagak River hosts the largest king salmon run in Alaska.

Annual commercial catches between 1984 and 2003 averaged nearly 24 million sockeye salmon, 69,000 chinook, 971,000 chum, 133,000 coho and 593,000 pink. In 2007, the Bristol Bay sockeye salmon run yielded approximately 44.3 million. In 2008, the yield was 42 million. Bristol Bay's productive salmon runs are remarkable even by Alaska's standards, where the next largest commercial sockeye salmon run in 2008 was 4.15 million in the Alaska Peninsula/Aleutian Islands region.

Year after year, the fish keep coming back in astounding numbers, largely due to the sound, scientific management of state and federal agencies. National Geographic listed Alaska as one of only three well-managed fisheries in the world, the others being Iceland and New Zealand.

¹ Economics of Wild Salmon Watersheds: Bristol Bay, Alaska, February 2007, John Duffield and David Patterson, Department of Mathematical Sciences, The University of Montana

² CFEC Permit Holdings, Harvests, and Estimated Gross Earnings by Resident Type in the Bristol Bay Salmon Gillnet Fisheries, CFEC Report 09-1N, February, 2009

Alaska's salmon fisheries are still thriving. Regrettably, the same cannot be said for wild salmon stocks elsewhere. On the West Coast of the United States and British Columbia, once abundant, wild salmon runs have drastically declined and commercial ocean salmon fishing may be closed or limited in 2009 in some areas.

References

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