



For the last two years, there has been no commercial salmon fishing off the California and Southern Oregon coasts because the Sacramento River chinook run has been so weak. This year, after [early pessimism](#), prospects for salmon fishing look more promising. The Pacific Fishery Management Council has made public the [three management options](#) it will consider at its April meeting. Two of the three would allow at least some commercial and recreational fishing.

The Council's chair [told the Sacramento Bee](#) that it is unlikely that the season will be entirely closed this year. That sounds like very good news for California fishing communities. But there are two important caveats. First, any season would necessarily be limited in both time and space. It won't exactly be back to the good times for the fishing boats. Second, although I want to believe that the Council's move to re-open fishing is good news for the salmon, I can't help but harbor some lingering doubts.

The draft options are based on a [forecast that roughly 245,000](#) fall run chinook will return this fall. That's well above the escapement goal (the estimate of the number that need to escape the fishery to spawn inland in order to have sustainable production) of 122,000 to 180,000. Those numbers suggest that there should be a sizeable "harvestable surplus."

But the models are far from certain. The actual number of returning chinook, according to the Council, could be anywhere from over half a million to zero. That's right, zero. The

history of fisheries regulation in the US suggests that the Council's estimate is more likely to be too high than too low. And, indeed, that's what recent history in this particular fishery suggests. Last year, the Council predicted that more than 120,000 chinook would return, but in fact less than 40,000 did. If this year's prediction is as bad as last year's, there won't be enough fish to support any kind of fishery.

California authorities think the Council is being too optimistic. From the Sacramento Bee story:

"We have concerns about the way in which the projections have been based," said Harry Morse, a spokesman at the California Department of Fish and Game, which urged the council to consider shutting down the season. "There's no historical precedence for a return from 39,000 to 245,000 fish in one year."

There's still time to revise the preseason estimate, since even the most optimistic alternative projects a fishery that won't open until September. Let's hope the Council leavens its enthusiasm with a stronger dose of reality.