

SOCKEYE HARVESTS TO REMAIN STRONG, BUT RETREAT FROM HISTORIC HIGHS

After four consecutive years of huge sockeye salmon harvests on the Pacific coast, early season forecasts for 2009 suggest a supply correction. Alaska's Department of Fisheries and Game (ADF&G) has yet to release its statewide salmon forecast, but issued a regional one for Bristol Bay, where over 50% of the total sockeye salmon catch occurs on the Pacific coast. Due to the importance of this fishery, it foreshadows the trend for the coastwide sockeye harvest.

Here are the sockeye harvests for the last four years:

Sockeye salmon harvests				
<i>all figures in '000s of fish</i>				
Area	2005	2006	2007	2008
BC	384	4,195	645	745
Alaska				
Southeast	1,608	1,334	1,905	422
Prince William Sound	1,989	2,525	3,231	1,303
Cook Inlet	5,483	2,428	3,694	2,770
Bristol Bay	24,525	28,493	29,773	27,756
Kodiak	3,052	1,586	2,014	1,819
Other	6,729	5,283	6,851	4,953
Total Alaska	43,386	41,649	47,468	39,023
Grand total	43,770	45,844	48,113	39,768

This table shows:

- Alaskan harvests of 40+ million fish from 2005-2007 and almost 40 million fish in 2008. These are all near or within the top 10 annual harvests on record.
- As Bristol Bay harvests rise and fall, so generally do total sockeye harvests.

Bristol Bay

For 2009, ADF&G predicts a total run of approximately 34 million fish in Bristol Bay, which would yield a commercial harvest of 24 million fish. This is still a large harvest relative to historical averages, but would be a 15-20% drop from harvests over the last three years of 28-30 million fish and would be the smallest harvest since 2005.

Fraser River (BC)

In previous decades the Fraser River sockeye fishery was a second tier producer. But a variety of known and unknown factors have led to that fishery's collapse in recent years. Apart from a surprisingly large run in 2006, the run has declined to a fraction of its historic strength.

In 2004 and 2005, returns to the river were only 10% of those expected. As the fishery targets sockeye at a mean age of four-five years, the run will likely remain crippled until at least 2010, if not permanently.

In conclusion, a drop in the Bristol Bay sockeye harvest of approximately four million fish will likely result in an equivalent drop in the coastwide 2009 sockeye harvest to approximately 35-36 million fish.

Sources: ADF&G, Canada Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO)

Implications for frozen seafood buyers:

- With the abundance of sockeye salmon over the last five years, sockeye prices have remained relatively constant as prices for other salmon species have surged upward. Sockeye prices even retreated very slightly in the last two years.
- Although lower than harvests in the last four years, the projected 2009 harvest is still large, so availability should have no major effect on prices.

- More likely, the global economic slowdown will overshadow any minor supply fluctuations, as demand retreats with timid consumers.
- In a recession we generally expect middle- and lower-income consumers to forsake mid-range products in favour of low-price alternatives. Sales of high-priced products tend not to suffer as much, as higher-income consumers adjust their spending less.
- Sockeye products are generally in the mid- to high range of seafood prices. Therefore prices for some sockeye products will likely see downward pressure.

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