

Why Pink Salmon?

From time to time, organizations with a long history of responsibly working for the public good find themselves in the cold spotlight of question. In a widely published event over the past few months, the Valdez Fisheries Development Association Inc., found itself and a planned pink salmon increase at its Solomon Gulch hatchery thrust into the raw and unfriendly arena of Alaska's fish politics.

Some might ask why the state would allow additional increases of hatchery pink salmon. The answer may surprise you.

Wild Alaskan Pink salmon, including those of hatchery origin, are a high quality food fish. Each year millions of pinks are harvested and plunged immediately into cold seawater to preserve freshness. This commitment to quality allows this versatile fish to be processed into many forms, creating nutritious and cost effective meals for a hungry global population. Many Americans also enjoy this great fish; arriving in Valdez each summer to fill their freezers at Allison Point. VFDA provides the largest pink salmon sport fishery in Alaska. Countless others benefit from government sponsored food programs which feature Wild Alaskan pink salmon. A delicious and healthy protein, which cannot always be supplied by higher priced and sometimes unavailable species, such as Kings or Sockeyes.

Prince William Sound has always been a key producer of pink salmon. In the 1970's the state, in partnership with private not for profit organizations, used modern hatchery technology to boost salmon numbers to provide a stable annual supply of fish to support coastal economies. Concerns such as straying and interactions with other marine species were considered by the state even before hatcheries were permitted. Regional planners, including members of industry and government, developed production plans to enhance the Sound's salmon fisheries to provide a longer and more robust fishing season. VFDA built upon this direction and turned local salmon stocks into the largest and earliest commercially viable pink salmon fishery in the state; providing an additional three weeks of fishery and seafood processing activity that was historically unavailable. This lack of conflict with other salmon fisheries drove industry's request for a reasonable expansion of hatchery production at Solomon Gulch in 2016. The first for VFDA in 25 years.

Many hatcheries have pink salmon programs which provide the financial bedrock to enhance sport and commercial fisheries with other desirable species such as Coho, Chinook and Sockeye salmon. These species require substantial infrastructure to culture and are costly to provide in large numbers. As an example, VFDA provides an annual coho salmon release of approx. 1.9 million smolts for the benefit of the sport fishery. Totalling less than one percent of the salmon production at Solomon Gulch hatchery, our coho program costs 20% of the annual hatchery operating budget and consumes a substantial portion of the available water supply. Unlike the commercial fishery, there is no mechanism to recover the annual costs of this sport fishery benefit from the user. Operational costs, facility maintenance, and debt retirement are recovered through the sale of pink salmon and donations. These additional cost recovery sales reduce the amount of pinks available to the commercial fishery. Without pink salmon production at Solomon Gulch hatchery, there may have been no sport fishery enhancement in Valdez. Certainly not at the level we all enjoy today.

Early state records show an historic annual coho salmon return to Robe Lake of less than 10,000 salmon before VFDA was founded. Since the inception of VFDA's sportfish enhancement program the total return of coho salmon to Port Valdez has greatly increased. The last nine year average harvest of VFDA coho by the sport fishery in the Valdez area has been 47,000 fish. A nearly five-fold increase. Sport

fishery enhancement by VFDA has put Valdez on the map as a premier sport fish destination. The Valdez Silver Salmon Derby and the Women's Derby, which alone had over 500 entrants to the August 11th event, show the true benefit of more hatchery fish.

VFDA is reaffirming its commitment to area sport fisheries and has begun engineering a new coho rearing facility for construction in coming years. The cost will be substantial, but so will the benefits of more efficient salmon production. It's an exciting time at VFDA and we are proud to continue our partnership with the Valdez community to improve our local fishing economy.....Good Fishing!

Mike H. Wells
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