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Sept. 7, 1994

Letter to the Editor
San Francisco Chronicle
901 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA 94103-2988

Dear Editor:

Glen Martin's reporting on the salmon situation in Shasta River (Salmon Lose Fight for Shasta River, Aug. 22) provides another example of the need for a collaborative effort to save threatened species throughout California. Confrontations, ultimatums and legal skirmishes won't restore the chinook salmon runs in Shasta River as rapidly as will working together.

This is precisely why the Department of Fish and Game supports the Coordinated Resources Management and Planning program (CRMP) for the Shasta River. It is a practical effort to bring local interest groups together in a voluntary fish habitat restoration program. The Department is committed to restoring the salmon fishery and conserving the biological diversity of the region. We also appreciate the property rights concerns of landowners. The problems of the entire Shasta River watershed must be addressed to save the salmon for future generations.

As Martin correctly noted, the CRMP process has already borne several dividends for the river. In general, we've made more progress through the CRMP in the past year than during the previous 50.

We look forward to more cooperative work and success in the future.

Sincerely,

Boyd Gibbons
Director

Salmon Lose Fight for Shasta River

Once-mighty migration has slowed to a trickle

By Glen Martin
Chronicle Staff Writer

Shasta Valley, Siskiyou County

Flowing through the serene, volcanic landscape of northeastern California, the Shasta River once provided an annual spectacle of awesome dimensions — tens of thousands of Chinook salmon migrating upstream to their ancestral spawning grounds.

But the placid 40-mile-long river, which for centuries was the most important salmon-rearing stream in the sprawling Klamath River system, has not witnessed such a great migration in years.

SPECIAL REPORT

Worse, it is now on the verge of losing the trickle of fish that remain.

The numbers present a stunning and distressing portrait: Sixty years ago, up to 80,000 Chinook salmon filled the river during the fall run. The annual count now has declined to about 1,000 fish, sometimes dipping to a mere 300.

Such numbers have made the Shasta emblematic of the decline of California's once great salmon fishery. Its waters, like that of other salmon producing rivers, were dammed and diverted for agriculture and other uses.

Corrective action that could save the fishery is stymied by an acrimonious dispute between ranchers and environmentalists. State wildlife officials are trying to bring both parties together under a voluntary program, with the aim of developing cooperative solutions to the dilemma. But so far the effort has borne little fruit due to the polarized positions of the two camps.

"The Department of Fish and Game's field staff know the severity of the problem and want to act on it, but the higher-ups are very reluctant to do so," said one state fisheries expert, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Ranchers and fish advocates cite a variety of factors for the salmon's decline, including excessive river and ocean fishing and the ongoing drought.

"The drought is just killing us," said rancher Blair Smith, who has worked his land for 44 years in the shadow of Mount Shasta. "Everything else is infinitesimal compared to the lack of rain. It's tough on the fish and tough on us."

But biologists who have studied the river say the hard evidence points to long-term water diversions for agriculture as the primary reason for the salmon's decline.

Until the construction of Lake Shastina dam on the upper reaches of the river in the mid-sixties, said consulting fisheries biologist Bill Kier, the Shasta's water ran faster, colder and clearer, scouring silt from the gravel beds that salmon need for successful spawning.

But the completion of the dam
SHASTA: Page A4 Col. 1

Shasta River May Lose Last of Chinook Salmon

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— and increased diversion of Shasta water by local ranchers for pasturage and hay — greatly reduced the river's volume. Silt caked the spawning gravels, or "redds," and small diversion dams along the streambed prevented salmon from reaching their spawning grounds.

Ongoing agricultural activity stripped trees from the banks, causing the water to warm up — sometimes to 80 degrees. Increased cattle grazing meant more cattle manure, resulting in large quantities of ammonia sluicing into the river; algae bloomed and oxygen levels dipped.

Poached Salmon

The salmon literally cooked in this tepid, nutrient-rich broth.

For residents along the Shasta, which rolls by the hamlets of Grenada, Gazelle, Montague and Hawkinsville, river water is life's blood, sustaining an economy long rooted in ranching and farming.

Talk of stricter limits on water use in order to protect the salmon has engendered negative reactions in the agricultural community ranging from anxiety to outright hostility. It is the kind of acrid atmosphere that has produced talk of violence in some circles, inducing many salmon advocates to speak only on condition of anonymity.

culture along the river," said Daniel. "You also have ranchers with fully adjudicated water rights who are wary of any government intervention."

In the ideal scenario, the CRMP would persuade the valley's 40 or more ranchers to fence off the river to cattle, plant trees to cool the redds and — most importantly — sell some of their water rights to regulating agencies to boost cold water flows.

Daniel points to the substitution of a bankside pump for a dam on the river as an example of progress made under the CRMP. Before, salmon were inhibited from reaching their spawning grounds by the dam, which impounded water for irrigation. Now, the pump provides water through a screened intake established at normal river level, and the fish can pass unimpeded.

"That has helped lower water temperatures and increase water velocity," said Daniel.

Fencing Installed

Several miles of fencing designed to keep cattle out of the river and encourage riparian growth have also been installed under the auspices of the CRMP.

"I think that we've accomplished more in the nine months of our participation in the CRMP than we would have if we had spent nine months in court (prosecuting ranchers under Fish and Game codes or the state Endangered Species Act)," said Daniel.

Yet these first remedial steps have not proved sufficient to save the fish.

er are especially crucial to the Chinook's future, including a ranch owned by cattleman Richard Sanders in the upper valley and federal land administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management near the Shasta River's confluence with the Klamath. The Hole in the Ground Ranch, now owned by the Bank of America, also contains habitat essential to the survival of the Shasta's minuscule coho salmon run.

But if there is one holding that is absolutely critical to the river's anadromous fisheries, it is the Big Springs Ranch. Composed of 5,000 acres along approximately three miles of river, the ranch contains some of the best spawning habitat in the Klamath system, as well as a series of cold, high-volume springs that, experts say, could be used to lower the river's steamy summer temperatures.

"Properly managed, the Big Springs Ranch would go a long way toward bringing back the fish," said Nat Bingham, a commercial salmon troller and the habitat director for the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "The property came up on the market several years ago, and we tried to get the state Wildlife Conservation Board (the land acquisition arm of the Department of Fish and Game) to buy it, but they refused."

The property was purchased instead by Rodney Busk, a former Bay Area real estate developer who has expressed his disinclination to work with the CRMP or any other agency devoted to resuscitating the salmon.

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"About a year ago it got to the point where something had to be done or the entire run was going to disappear," said one fisheries expert. "That's when the Fish and Game wardens and biologists petitioned the department to list the salmon under the state Endangered Species Act." But top department administrators opted instead for a voluntary fish habitat improvement program aimed at promoting cooperation among ranchers and environmentalists.

Called the Coordinated Resources Management and Planning program — or CRMP (pronounced "crimp") — it was founded two years ago to establish restoration schemes acceptable to all sides, such as fencing the river off from cattle and replanting streamside vegetation. Similar programs are in place on other California rivers, with varying results.

Dick Daniel, the water management coordinator for the state Department of Fish and Game, said a department priority in supporting the CRMP was "to win the trust" of the ranchers.

"It's important to realize that you have a 150-year history of agri-

"It seems to me we're moving backwards at this point," said a Shasta Valley resident and salmon advocate. "It's very sad. Much more needs to be done to make any difference, and the local resistance is tremendous."

And in spite of the CRMP's modest successes it has also endured some failures, most notably an aborted "pulse flow" designed to speed young salmon on their way to the Klamath and the ocean.

Pulse flows are periodic releases of cold water by ranchers all along the river, most often timed for the spring and summer. When conducted correctly, they transport young fish seaward before rising water temperatures can kill them. But the flows — which were carried out in 1993 — were abandoned this year because two ranchers on the lower river refused to release any water.

Some properties along the riv-

Ordered Reporters Away

In response to inquiries by The Chronicle, Busk told reporters to "stay off my property and leave me alone."

In the middle of the dispute are ranchers who want to accommodate the salmon lobby — as long as they can retain their basic water rights and avoid the listing of the Chinook.

"It's a matter of breaking down the barriers to change," said Blair Hart, president of the Shasta Valley CRMP and a fifth-generation Siskiyou rancher who runs a cow-calf operation on 7,000 acres of land.

"You have environmentalists, the regulating agencies, a certain group of ranchers who are willing to work with the CRMP and another group who are against any compromise whatsoever," said Hart. "A lot of people want to do right by the fish, but they also

want to be able to keep ranching. Everyone is going to have to bleed a little if this thing is going to work. It isn't easy."

The ranchers who are adamantly against any kind of substantive change in water deliveries make some fisheries advocates believe voluntary measures to save the Shasta Chinook are doomed to failure.

"They're bogging down the whole process," said a local environmentalist. "And it's not like we have a lot of time left. The fish are really in trouble."

If the CRMP remains paralyzed, some kind of legal action from

either federal or state agencies may occur — and that could put severe constraints on agricultural water use in the valley.

"(State Fish and Game) Code 5937 states any dam on a river must have enough water going over it to keep downstream fish in a healthy condition," said Rex Presley, a state game warden assigned to the Shasta Valley area. "Obviously, downstream Shasta fish are not in a healthy condition and I've told the CRMP that we ultimately have to enforce 5937."

The anticipated listing of coastal coho salmon under the federal Endangered Species Act could also

CHRONICLE GRAPHIC

MONDAY, AUGUST 22, 1994

'Everything else is infinitesimal compared to the lack of rain. It's tough on the fish and tough on us'

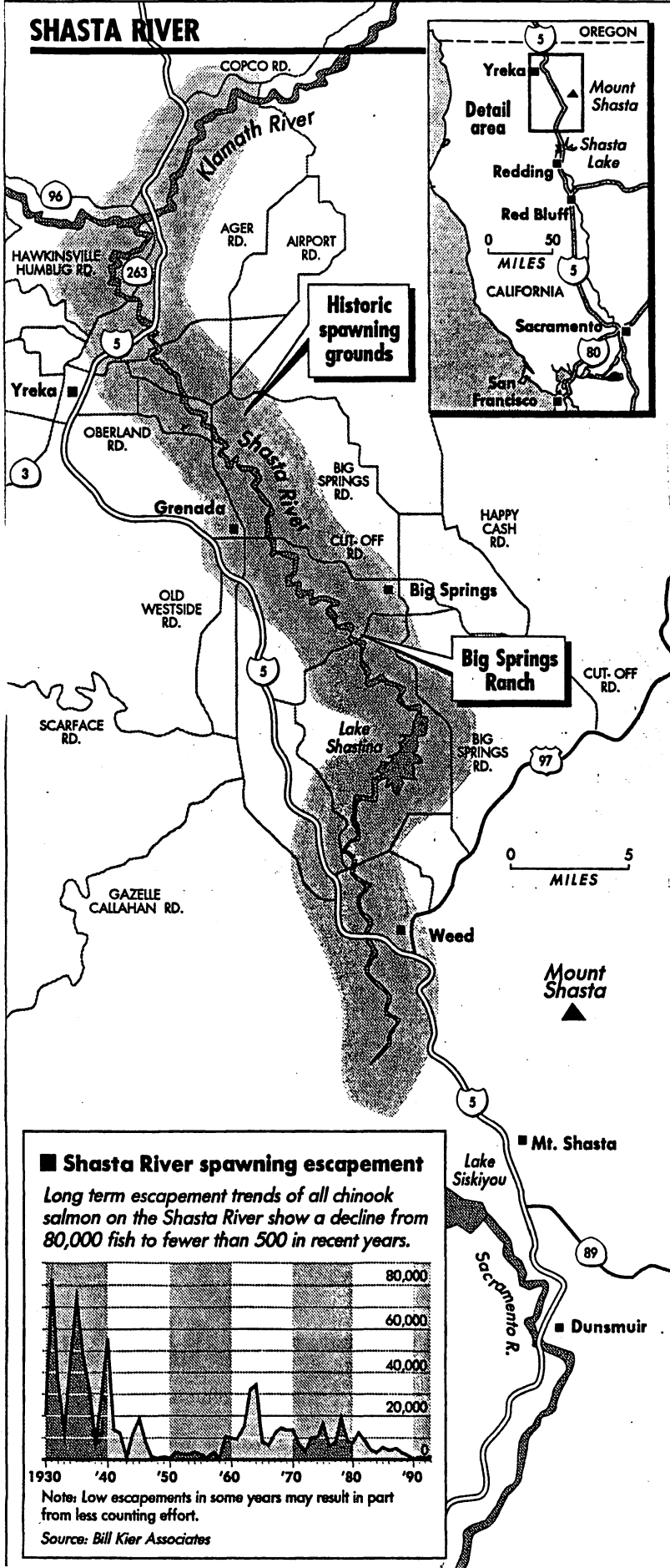
— BLAIR SMITH,
MOUNT SHASTA RANCHER

affect Shasta River water deliveries. Likewise, expected federal rules on controlling agricultural "tailwater" — or runoff — could force ranchers to provide a better habitat for the fish.

The best way out of the crisis, said Hart, would be substantive government aid.

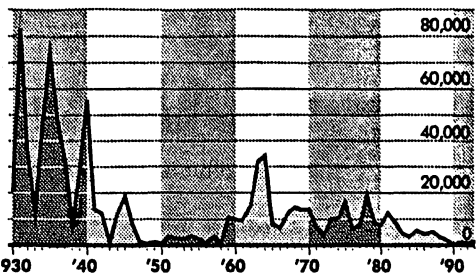
"If the state or the feds took out their checkbooks and made serious offers to buy up some water rights to devote to instream flows, you'd be surprised who would line up," said Hart. "A lot of ranchers want to help — but they can't be expected to shoulder the entire financial burden."

SHASTA RIVER



Shasta River spawning escapement

Long term escapement trends of all chinook salmon on the Shasta River show a decline from 80,000 fish to fewer than 500 in recent years.



Note: Low escapements in some years may result in part from less counting effort.

Source: Bill Kier Associates

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