

## Delusional Reality about West Coast Salmon

Posted July 11, 2008



**About the author:** *Dr. Robert Lackey is a senior scientist in EPA's Office of Research and Development's laboratory in Corvallis, Oregon. He has been involved professionally with West Coast salmon issues for 44 years and was awarded EPA's highest award, the Gold Medal, for his salmon work.*

One of my favorite fictional characters is detective extraordinaire Joe Friday. Joe demanded and provided "just the facts" as he sleuthed his way through the gossip and hearsay to winnow out the truth. Scientists responsible for informing the public and policy makers about ecological policy issues should attempt to do the same — just the facts — the straightforward, sometimes unpleasant realities.

A case in point: The 2008 collapse of salmon runs along the West Coast is being chronicled in major national newspapers, with headlines proclaiming "Disaster Strikes West Coast Fishermen," "Worst Salmon Runs in History," and "Agencies Baffled by Unexpected Salmon Collapse."

Let's apply Joe Friday's "just the facts" approach to the wild salmon situation to see what society might expect in the future.

**Fact 1:** Wild salmon in California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and southern British Columbia are in [serious trouble](#). Most runs in the Western U.S. are at less than 10% of their pre-1850 levels. Over two dozen are listed as threatened or endangered, with many more likely to follow unless something changes.

**Fact 2:** Meager salmon runs along the West Coast are [nothing new](#). The decline in wild salmon numbers started with the California gold rush in 1848; causes include water pollution, habitat loss, over-fishing, dams, irrigation projects, predation, and competition with hatchery-produced salmon and non-native fish species.

**Fact 3:** If society wishes to change the future for wild salmon, something must be done about the unrelenting growth in the [human population](#) level along the West Coast (California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia). By 2100, there could be 200 – 250 million people in the region: a quadrupling by the end of this century — barely 90 years from now.

**Fact 4:** If the human population levels increase as expected, options for restoring salmon runs to significant, sustainable levels are greatly limited. Consider the demand for houses, schools, stadiums, expressways, automobiles, malls, air conditioning, drinking water, consumer goods, golf courses, and sewer treatment plants. [Society's options](#) for sustaining wild salmon in significant numbers would be just about non-existent.

Whatever policy makers propose to do about the 2008 collapse of West Coast salmon runs, these four facts cannot be ignored. Policy makers should demand from scientists [realistic and honest assessments](#) of the current and future conditions for salmon.

Joe Friday was a tough, no-nonsense professional. Those of us who provide the public and policy makers with the best available information about salmon ought to follow his lead: “just the facts”.

=====

View this blog post at the EPA web site:  
<https://blog.epa.gov/blog/2008/07/science-wednesday-does-the-public-expect-too-much-from-science/>

=====