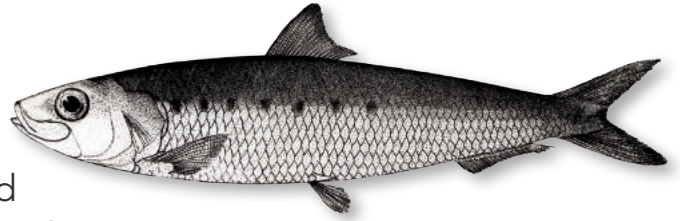


# BOOM AND BUST

Fishing **Pacific sardines** gets complicated between natural swings and inaccurate stock assessments



Nick Rahaim is a Monterey (Calif.) County Weekly staff writer. He has been a deckhand in more than a dozen fisheries.

BY NICK RAHAIM

Last April I received a text from an old captain telling me his boat was in Reedsport, Ore., and that they needed a replacement deckhand for sardines. The Pacific Coast was dry with a looming closure of the fishery for the 2015–16 season imminent. They were fishing the last of the 2014–15 quota, after most boats from California to Washington preferred to stay tied up rather than test their luck in the empty seas. A local crabber claimed there were schools of sardines as far as the eye could see outside Winchester Bay, so a market was set up and a few lucky seiners came in.

The few boats fishing had already landed nearly a million pounds each. With an ex-vessel price in excess of \$350 a metric ton, they were raking in money. Tax Day was fast approaching and the IRS demanded money I didn't have, so I packed up my things and high-tailed it to Oregon, even though I felt like a cowboy chasing after the least heard of buf-

“The closure was unforeseen and unfair. Right in the height of the season when we should have been fishing, they shut us down.”

— Randy Roberts,  
Del Mar Seafoods



JOHN BUTLER NOAA

▲ Sardines have long been known as a boom or bust fishery.

► The Pacific Fish Co.'s *Anacapa* loaded with 20 tons of sardines in Monterey.

falo on the Great Plains.

Under current regulation, the Pacific sardine fishery must be shut down when the biomass falls below the cutoff threshold of 150,000 metric tons. NOAA biologists found there to be less than 100,000 metric tons in 2015. On April 12, the Pacific Fishery Management Council said there would be no directed sardine fishery from July 1, 2015, to June 31, 2016.

“The closure was unforeseen and unfair,” said Randy Roberts of Watsonville, Calif.-based Del Mar Seafoods. “Right in the height of the season when we should have been fishing, they shut us down.”

While the closure has hit the industry hard after sardines brought an average of \$12.5 million annually in ex-vessel revenue to West Coast ports since 2005, the biomass has been in steady decline, peaking at more than 1 million metric tons in 2008 to just over the mandated cut-off of 150,000 metric tons in 2014.

“I don't think anyone would ques-



NOAA NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES

tion there has been a decline, but the question is scale,” said Diane Pleschner-Steele, director of the California Wetfish Producers Association. “Our beef is that stock assessments are inaccurate, that it doesn't reflect reality.”

A week after the closure there were at least 150 tons in Santa Cruz Harbor, Roberts claimed. “There were sardines in Monterey Bay the whole summer, but we weren't allowed to fish them,” he lamented.

Kerry Griffin, staff officer for coastal pelagic species with the Pacific Fishery Management Council, understands the closure — the first since 1998 — is a “tough pill to swallow,” but said “the les-

sons of Cannery Row guide our cautious approach today.”

“The stock assessment models have to represent the best scientific information available,” Griffin said, defending the science behind the closure. “They’re not perfect, and nobody knows exactly how many fish are out there at any one time. But it is a scientifically robust, transparent and peer-reviewed process.”

Sardines have long been known as a boom to bust fishery. In 1930s and ’40s sardines on the Pacific Coast were likely the largest fishery in the Western

Over the decades sardines bounced back. The largest catch was in 2007 when fishermen landed more than 127,000 metric tons. In 2012, the price more than doubled from roughly \$103 per metric ton in 2007 to more than \$208. Ports like Westport, Wash., which were used to handling only tuna and shrimp in summer months, were overrun with sardine seiners. Sardines brought fishermen in Pacific ports more than \$21 million in 2012, up from \$13 million in 2007.

In the early 2010s salmon seining in Southeast Alaska was starting to get hot,

yet I would look down at peers fishing for sardines on the Washington and Oregon coasts earning double what I was bringing in for the summer. I wanted in, and when I finally got my opportunity it was too late. I arrived to Reedsport just in time for the weather to come up and the schools to scatter. We were tied up to the dock on Tax Day when the Pacific council recommended that NMFS shut down the fisheries, leaving the remaining quota from the 2014-15 season in the water.

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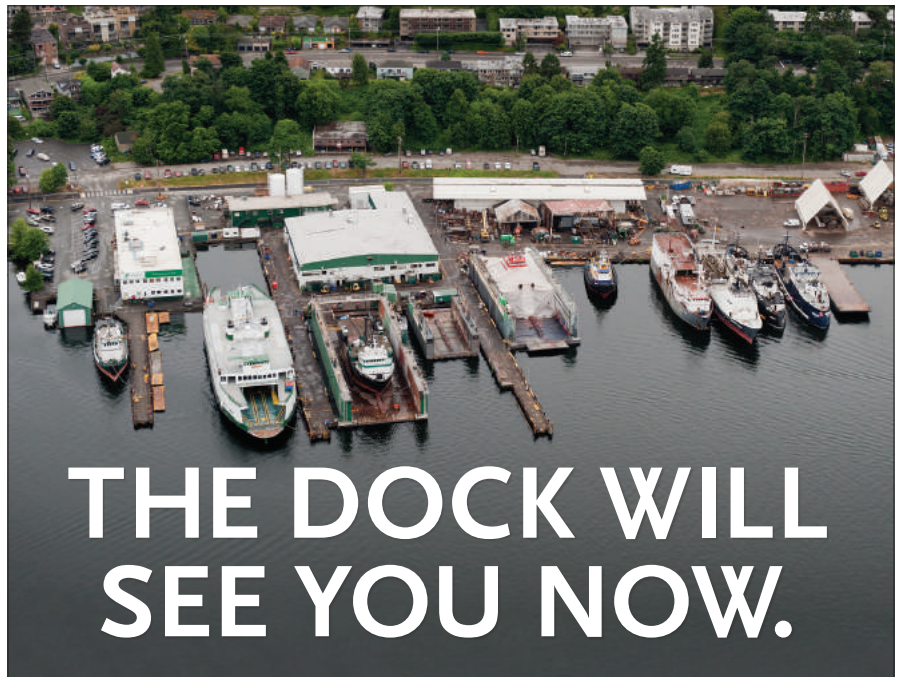
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— Diane Pleschner-Steele,  
California Wetfish  
Producers Association

Hemisphere, according to a NOAA. At the time Monterey, Calif., was the third largest fishing port in the world and was enshrined in the cultural imagination by John Steinbeck in his classic “Cannery Row.”

In 1945, Monterey supported 19 canneries, 20 reduction facilities and a fleet of more than 100 boats strong. Sardines then went bust in the late-1940s from a combination of overfishing and the natural cycle of fluctuation in ocean temperature leading to a change in geographic abundance. Sardines were not commercially harvested again other than incidental bycatch until the late-1980s. Ed Ricketts, pioneering marine biologist and friend of Steinbeck, when asked what happened to the sardines tersely responded, “They’re in cans!”

To be fair, the current collapse in sardine population is not the result of overfishing, according to NOAA biologists. The exploitation rate of the resource has averaged 11 percent since the year 2000, which is considered very low, Griffin said. In absence of commercial fishing, sardines would still have experienced a severe decline, he continued.



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### Partnership with UK's John West

ASMI's Northern Europe program partnered with John West to produce a video highlighting the story of Alaska salmon, from sea to table. John West is the UK's leading canned fish brand and a trusted household name. The company is now a partner in promoting wild Alaska canned salmon.

### Feature in *Weight Watchers*

*Weight Watchers* magazine featured a story about Alaska seafood in its September issue. The six-page spread highlights Alaska's commitment to sustainability, the health benefits of eating wild Alaska seafood, and provides their readers with an assortment of healthy, delicious recipes including Honey Mustard Roasted Alaska Salmon and Broiled Halibut with Lemon and Herbs. *Weight Watchers* magazine has a circulation of 1.3 million and a large online viewership. The article is available online and can be found here.

### Other press coverage

"Everything You Need To Know About Wild Alaskan Salmon," *Food Republic*, Oct. 6, 2015

"Cooking Fish from Frozen and Other Things I Learned on My Alaska Seafood Trip," *Martha Stewart*, Oct. 5, 2015

"Students across the country to get canned Bristol Bay sockeye for lunch," *KTOO*, Sept. 23, 2015

"How Your Wild Salmon Is Caught in Alaska," *Glamour*, Sept. 11, 2015

Chef Elizabeth Falkner Cooks — Home & Family (video), *Hallmark Channel*

"Should I Eat Salmon?" *Time*, Aug. 27, 2015

"Salmon Spring Rolls with Sesame Miso Sauce," *Food Network*, Aug. 17, 2015

"(Almost) Everything I Ate in Alaska



Seafood feature in *Weight Watchers* magazine.

Last Week," *Glamour*, Aug. 11, 2015

"Alaska Seafood Demystified," *The Daily Meal*, July 23, 2015

"4 Frozen Foods You Don't Have to Defrost," *Oprah*, July 20, 2015

"9 Things You Didn't Know About Salmon," *Food Network*, July 17, 2015

"Orange Chili Salmon," *Relish*, July 16, 2015

"How to Grill a Piece of Fish in 5 Minutes," *Yahoo Health*, July 14, 2015

## OUR FISHERY

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The weather report didn't look like we'd get a chance to set our net around a school of sardines before we were shut down. After a stern haul to clean out the last of the decaying oily fish in the seine, I was sent home ending an eight-day vacation on the central Oregon coast. The steady pay of a nine-to-five started to look appealing.

It remains to be seen if the biomass will rise above the 150,000 metric ton threshold for there to be a directed fishery for the 2016-17 season. Biologists are still compiling the data from the stock surveys, so it's too early to tell, Griffin said. But Pleschner-Steele is not optimistic for the next year. "I would be surprised if we got anything," she said.

Yet, she is optimistic for the long-term future, believing there will not be another decades-long slump like the 1960s and '70s. Studies of fish scales deposited in the California shoreline going back 1,700 years show sardines have a 60-year cycle of abundance, with declines lasting an average of 36 years and an average recovery of 30 years. But a changing climate and the predicted El Niño are

likely to create conditions favorable for sardines.

"The ocean temperatures in the late-1940s to the middle 1970s were really cold," Pleschner-Steele said. "The warming trend in the ocean we're seeing now will allow sardines to recruit faster."

Yet, it's difficult time for many seiners in California. Warm ocean temperatures have pushed squid into deeper water. When fishermen are able to wrap their nets around squid, there are often too many sardines mixed in to bring to market, according to Pleschner-Steele. Anchovies are also scarce, as colder temperatures brought by La Niña conditions are optimal for their abundance.

When asked if the ex-vessel price would remain strong — pushing \$380 a metric ton up from a 10-year average of just under \$190 — when the fishery reopens, Pleschner-Steele chuckled. "I'd hope so, but the market for coast pelagic fish is just as dynamic as the resource itself," she said.



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4793 Cobble Way, Ferndale, WA 98248

360-441-2346

BuffaloBoats42@gmail.com

