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**NMFS DECLARES COMMERCIAL FISHERIES  
FAILURE IN ALASKA'S BRISTOL BAY/KUSKOKWIM SALMON FISHERY**

In response to the record low returns of salmon in the Bristol Bay and Kuskokwim region of Alaska, the National Marine Fisheries Service today declared a commercial fishery failure, in the region. This declaration is designed to assist commercial fishermen and small fishery-dependent businesses that have sustained heavy uninsured losses, the National Marine Fisheries Service said.

For the first time, the Commerce Department has used its legislative authority under section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to declare a commercial fishery failure in response to a request from a governor. Alaska Governor Tony Knowles formally requested the declaration under the Act in August after the salmon runs projected for the two areas were off by 78 percent. The low salmon runs caused the value of the fishery to drop nearly \$100 million from recent averages.

This declaration will allow the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to provide funds appropriated for this purpose to the state of Alaska to assess the economic and social effects of the commercial fishery failure or to support an activity that would restore the fishery or prevent a similar failure in the future and to assist a fishing community affected by such failure. The Act limits the federal share of the cost of any relief activity to 75 percent. Funds to support any disaster relief have not yet been appropriated, and currently there are none available.

In recognition of the urgency of the state's request, NMFS made the finding today in advance of developing interpretive guidelines under the Act. NMFS has formed a task force to develop regulatory guidelines by which to guide future disaster requests.

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The commercial fishery failure occurred as a result of the inordinately poor runs of sockeye and chum salmon in the Bristol Bay and Kuskokwim River areas. According to data supplied by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the 1997 harvest of 12.3 million sockeye salmon was the lowest catch since 1978. In 1996, the fishery harvested 29.6 million sockeye from a run totaling 36.9 million fish, which was a record year. The harvest of chum salmon fell to 307,000 fish from an average harvest of 1.2 million fish. According to the state, about 790 small businesses in Alaska have suffered substantial economic injury due to the fishery failure.

According to officials, the exact cause of the unexpectedly low returns of salmon is impossible to pinpoint, but the evidence points to a marine ecological event. Unusually warm conditions prevailed in the region this summer. Surface water temperatures ranged considerably warmer than those previously observed.

Under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act NMFS can declare a commercial fisheries disaster if requested to do so by a governor, or at any time the agency decides to do so. NMFS must determine that a fishery resource disaster resulted from either natural causes, man-made causes beyond the control of fishery managers, or undetermined causes. Further, if a commercial fishery failure occurred, then it must have resulted from the fishery resource disaster.

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