



# United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
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IN REPLY REFER TO:

FWS/R7/AFES

Report # B-6: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, October 2018.

The following information is a summary of the major updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that the Service is involved in related to the affairs of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

## **I. Endangered Species**

In 2014, the Service was petitioned to list as threatened or endangered the contiguous U.S. population of the tufted puffin or the entire population. The Service has determined that the population in the contiguous U.S. did not meet the definition of a distinct population segment. The Service has therefore initiated a species status assessment of the entire population of tufted puffins to determine if listing the species as threatened or endangered is warranted. The Service is currently gathering information regarding the species needs, threats, and distribution to inform our status assessment. Once the species status assessment is complete, a decision on whether listing is warranted or not is expected to be made in late 2019.

We are seeking information and data for tufted puffin throughout its range, regarding the biology, range, population trends, and threats. If you have any information regarding these, or would like more information regarding the listing process, please contact Erin Knoll, at [erin\\_knoll@fws.gov](mailto:erin_knoll@fws.gov).

## **II. Migratory Bird Management**

### *Update on Seabird Mortality Events and Monitoring*

Beginning in May 2018, an unusual seabird mortality event occurred throughout the northern Bering and southern Chukchi seas. The Service received reports of dozens to hundreds of dead birds on various beaches. The events continued into July and expanded north to Utqiagvik (Barrow) in the Arctic and south to St. Paul Island in the central Bering Sea and to the Lower Cook Inlet/Alaska Peninsula in the northern Gulf of Alaska. The Service is coordinating with local communities and agencies to document the scope and magnitude of the mortality event. Additionally, the Service is working with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center and USGS Alaska Science Center to determine if disease or harmful algal toxins are involved in the seabird die-off.

While seabird die-offs occur occasionally, typically in winter, such mortality events have been annual in Alaska since 2013, with the largest during 2015-2016, wherein hundreds of thousands of common murre and other marine birds (perhaps up to a half million) are estimated to have died. These and earlier recorded die-offs coincided with unusual warm water events. Additional mortality events include a puffin die-off at St. Paul Island in October-November 2016 and the June-September 2017 fulmar and shearwater die-off in the Bering and Chukchi seas. While starvation has been determined to be the cause of death for all carcasses examined by USGS during these recent events, exposure to biotoxins associated with harmful algal blooms may also be a contributing factor. The USGS is investigating how algal bloom biotoxins like saxitoxin affect birds. Little is known about the occurrence or effects of these toxins on wild seabirds, and it is difficult to detect the toxins in emaciated, dead birds.

This year's seabird mortality has been reported over a wide geographic region and throughout summer, with starvation as the only identified cause of death (to date). In addition, observations at seabird breeding colonies indicate lack of breeding attempts or very late breeding. Together, these observations suggest that the seabird die-offs stem from a lack of food or unfavorable foraging conditions, indicating ecosystem changes that may be associated with abnormally high ocean water temperatures, particularly in the Pacific Arctic. The Service has posted an updated one-page information sheet on the 2018 mortality event, linked via our Home page ([https://www.fws.gov/alaska/index\\_archive.htm](https://www.fws.gov/alaska/index_archive.htm)) or accessed directly at: [https://www.fws.gov/alaska/pdf/BeringSea\\_DieOff\\_Info\\_September2017Update.pdf](https://www.fws.gov/alaska/pdf/BeringSea_DieOff_Info_September2017Update.pdf).

In addition to the monitoring of seabird breeding colonies by the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, at-sea seabird surveys continued through 2018 by biologists from the Migratory Bird Management Program. Seabird observers from the Service participated in 11 vessel-based projects from the Gulf of Alaska to the Beaufort Sea. The Service will use the data to examine possible shifts in seabird distribution during years with warmer ocean temperatures.

For further information, contact Dr. Kathy Kuletz, Seabird Coordinator, at [kathy\\_kuletz@fws.gov](mailto:kathy_kuletz@fws.gov) (907-786-3453) within the Division of Migratory Bird Management.

### **III. Federal Subsistence Fisheries**

#### *General:*

Most stocks of Alaskan Chinook salmon have been in low or below average abundance in recent years, which has resulted in numerous fisheries restrictions and closures. This trend continued in 2018, including restrictions and closures of Federally managed subsistence fisheries.

Returns of sockeye salmon across Alaska were highly variable in 2018, with strong returns to Bristol Bay systems, and record low returns in numerous other locations. This resulted in a number of restrictions and closures of Federally managed subsistence fisheries for the year.

In conjunction with managers from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), Federal fisheries managers took the following actions:

#### *Yukon River:*

The 2018 preseason run size estimate for Chinook salmon was 173,000-251,000, which is below the historic average. Due to the below average run projection, there was no directed Chinook salmon commercial fishing. Directed subsistence harvest opportunity was restricted early in the season to protect early returning Chinook salmon and restrictions were relaxed as data regarding run strength and timing were collected. The preliminary main-stem run estimate at the Pilot Station sonar of 161,900 Chinook salmon is less than the 2017 return and below the long-term average. As a result of the run returning weaker than projected, restrictions on subsistence fishermen remained later into the season than last year. For 2018, the US/Canada Yukon River Panel agreed to continue the Interim Management Escapement Goal to Canada of 42,500-55,000 Chinook salmon. The preliminary estimated border passage for Canadian-origin Chinook salmon, based on cumulative passage at the Eagle sonar project and historical run timing, was approximately 57,946 Chinook salmon. Post-season total run size reconstruction will be available in late winter.

*Kuskokwim River:*

The 2018 preseason run size estimate for Chinook salmon was 116,000 to 150,000. This estimate was a revision from the original preseason forecast (140,000 – 193,000) due to modifications of the models that calculate the total run and escapement estimates. This forecasted return size was deemed enough to meet escapement goals and provide for a limited subsistence harvest.

Prior to the beginning of the Chinook salmon season, the Federal Subsistence Board (Board) determined that fishing would be closed to non-Federally qualified subsistence users to allow for the conservation of Chinook salmon and to protect the continuation of subsistence uses as mandated under the Alaska National Interest Conservation Act (ANILCA) Section 815. The Board further restricted harvest of Chinook salmon within Federally qualified subsistence users based on a Section 804 subsistence users prioritization analysis. The additional restriction limited the harvest of Chinook salmon to only Federally qualified subsistence users residing in the Kuskokwim River drainage and four specified coastal communities. Following the Board action, the Federal in-season manager closed the Federal waters of the Kuskokwim River main-stem, selected salmon tributaries, and non-salmon spawning tributaries within 100 yards of their confluence with the main-stem to the harvest of Chinook salmon by all Federally qualified users to assure the continued viability of populations of Chinook salmon within the Kuskokwim River drainage.

The Federal in-season manager provided five subsistence fishing opportunities with gear limited to 6” mesh or smaller gillnets for a total of 54 hours within the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). Additionally, the Federal in-season manager provided opportunities for eligible Federally qualified subsistence users to harvest Chinook salmon in Federal waters for selected areas between Kalskag and the Refuge boundary near Aniak due to extraordinarily high water levels that made fishing more difficult and less efficient. In total, 21,430 Chinook salmon, 44,290 chum salmon, and 23,180 sockeye salmon were harvested in the main-stem Kuskokwim River between Tuntutuliak and Akiak. On July 6, 2018, the Federal in-season manager rescinded all previously issued special actions concerning the harvest of Chinook salmon within Federal waters of the Kuskokwim area.

Chinook salmon escapement goals were met for two of the three escapement monitoring projects (Kogruklu and George rivers). The Kwethluk River was unable to monitor a majority of the Chinook salmon run due to high water conditions. Chinook salmon escapement goals were met for all systems with aerial based goals.

*Chignik River:*

The 2018 preseason forecast was for 848,000 early-run sockeye salmon. The run did not materialize as forecasted and when passage at the weir indicated that escapement would not be met, commercial fishing on Chignik River bound sockeye salmon stocks was limited. Subsistence fishing was also limited to Federally qualified subsistence users between June 22 and July 31, and further limited to 100 fish per community through a community harvest permit system. The final run size estimate was 263,979 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 350,000 – 450,000) counted at the weir.

The 2018 Chinook salmon return to the Chignik River was below average, with only 825 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 1,300-2,700) counted at the weir. The 2018 count did not provide enough fish for escapement or subsistence needs. Concurrent closures to the sport and Federal Subsistence fisheries were enacted on July 13, 2018.

*Buskin and Afognak Rivers:*

The 2018 sockeye salmon returns to the Buskin and Afognak drainages in the Kodiak Archipelago were below average and resulted in severe restrictions. In-season escapement monitoring data indicated that neither system would meet escapement goals without restrictions to fisheries. Concurrent closures to the State sport and subsistence fisheries and the Federal subsistence fishery targeting Buskin River sockeye salmon were enacted on June 16, 2018. Concurrent closures to the State sport and subsistence fisheries and the Federal subsistence fishery targeting Afognak River sockeye salmon were enacted on June 16, 2018. As of September 10, 4,281 sockeye salmon (Biological Escapement Goal 4,800 – 8,400) were counted at the Buskin weir, and 17,601 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 20,000 to 50,000) were counted at the Afognak River weir. The 2018 sockeye salmon escapements into both systems did not provide enough fish for both escapement or subsistence needs.

*Kenai River:*

The 2018 Kenai River late-run sockeye salmon preseason forecast was for an estimated return of 2.5 million fish, 1.1 million less than the 20-year average run. The forecast was updated in July to an estimate of less than 2.3 million fish, which resulted in a Sustainable Escapement Goal of 700,000 to 1,200,000 fish. The revised forecast, along with in-season data, resulted in an early closure of the Kenai River Personal Use fishery season on July 30. The sport fishery was restricted on July 30, and closed on August 4, out of concern for missing the escapement goal. All sport-fishing restrictions were rescinded on August 23, after in-season passage estimates indicated that the lower end of the escapement goal was met. Federal subsistence fisheries in the Kenai River downstream of the outlet of Skilak Lake were also closed to the harvest of sockeye salmon on August 9 based on in-season projections that the escapement goal would not be met. Restrictions to these fisheries were rescinded on August 28 after escapement was met.

The 2018 Kenai River early-run Chinook salmon preseason forecast was for an estimated return of 5,499 large (>750 mm mid-eye to fork) fish, which is within the Optimal Escapement Goal (3,900 – 6,600 fish) for the run. Restrictions to the sport fishery were implemented based on in-season projections of escapement, limiting the fishery to catch and release on June 13, and closing the fishery on June 20. The sport fishery closure covered the Kenai River from the mouth upstream to Skilak Lake until June 30, and the upper half of that section through July 31. The Federal subsistence rod and reel fishery for early-run Chinook salmon in Federal waters of the Kenai River was closed June 22 through July 15 based on in-season projections that the escapement goal would not be met.

*Situk River:*

The 2018 Situk River sockeye salmon return was below expectations, and the final weir count of 25,478 did not meet the escapement goal (Biological Escapement Goal 30,000 – 70,000). The return was below the recent five-year average, and prompted a closure of the Federal subsistence fishery for sockeye salmon between July 7 and September 4, 2018. Sport fishing for sockeye salmon was limited to catch and release on July 1, 2018, and closed completely from July 10 through December 31, 2018.

The 2018 Situk River Chinook salmon forecast was for a run size of 730 large (>660 mm mid-eye to fork) Chinook salmon (Biological escapement goal 450-1050). Based on the preseason forecast, and the recent small escapements, the ADF&G started the season with a closure on sport fishing for Chinook salmon beginning May 1, 2018. Similarly, the U.S. Forest Service did not issue any Federal subsistence fishing permits allowing the harvest of Chinook salmon in 2018. The 2018 preliminary escapement estimate of Situk River Chinook salmon is 375.

*Stikine River:*

The 2018 Stikine River pre-season terminal area abundance forecast was 6,900 large (>660 mm mid-eye to fork) Chinook salmon. According to provisions in the Pacific Salmon Treaty, the terminal area pre-season run estimate must be greater than 28,100 large Chinook salmon to produce an allowable catch for either the U.S. or Canada when managing for the mid-point of the escapement goal range (21,000). Therefore, Federal subsistence fishing for Chinook salmon in the Stikine River was restricted for the entire Chinook salmon season. Post-season total escapement estimates will be available later.

**Special Action Requests to the Federal Subsistence Board:**

In 2017, the Office of Subsistence Management received three Temporary Special Action requests from rural communities within the Kuskokwim River drainage. One of the requests was for the Board to assume management of the salmon fisheries for the Kuskokwim River. The Temporary Special Action requests also sought to have the Board adopt a preseason management plan, and limit the 2017 Kuskokwim River Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon fisheries to Federally qualified subsistence users in the Kuskokwim River drainages consistent with the ANILCA Section 804 subsistence user prioritization analysis that was implemented in 2016.

Ultimately, the Board approved limiting subsistence harvest of Chinook salmon in Federal Public waters of the Kuskokwim River drainage to Federally qualified subsistence users identified in a Section 804 Subsistence Users Prioritization analysis. The Board authorized that during this period, the in-season manager may implement a community-based allocation system among qualified users to allow more Chinook salmon subsistence fishing opportunity than would otherwise be provided. The Board determined there was a need to restrict the harvest of Chinook salmon for the conservation of healthy populations and to protect the continuation of subsistence uses as mandated under ANILCA Section 815.

In addition, the Ninilchik Traditional Council and the Service jointly submitted a Temporary Special Action request to the Board. The request was to implement the final components to the Kenai River Community Gillnet Fishery. The Board approved these changes in January 2017, but the process to incorporate them into Federal regulations is ongoing.

For further information, contact George Pappas, Office of Subsistence Management, at [George\\_Pappas@fws.gov](mailto:George_Pappas@fws.gov), or (907) 786-3822.