



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
1011 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, Alaska 99503



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Report # B-7: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, April 2023.

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 (Council).

Federal in-season subsistence fisheries management

- i. Alaska Region update: Since time immemorial, Alaska has sustained people, fish, birds, and other wildlife, supporting strong and resilient communities and ways of life. Traditional foods — including salmon, caribou, moose, and migratory birds — have been vital to food security and Indigenous cultures for the more than 230 Tribes who have stewarded the Alaska’s lands and set up fish camps in its watersheds for thousands of years. In recent years, these communities and the ecosystems they depend upon have suffered as climate change is impacting the Arctic four times faster than other parts of North America. One stark example of these impacts is the decline of Pacific salmon populations, leading to subsistence salmon fishing closures and empty smokehouses for people who have relied on salmon for more than 10,000 years. In recent consultations, congressional field hearings, and other forums, Department of the Interior (Department) leaders heard directly from Alaska Native Tribes and subsistence users about these ecosystem changes, their impacts on communities and cultures, and the need for immediate and lasting “gravel to gravel” action by the Federal government.

In response, the Department is making added investments in partnering with Tribes, Indigenous leaders, other agencies, and community partners to identify actions to enhance the resilience of the region’s ecosystems and communities. Service appropriations in the FY23 budget are being invested in actions to identify possible causes for declines in salmon productivity, including further research on Ichthyophonus disease in Yukon River Chinook salmon and its association with en route mortality of these salmon. In addition, the Service’s Federal fisheries managers continue to work closely with the State of Alaska, Alaska Native Tribes, the Department of Fisheries Oceans Canada, and Canadian First Nations to conserve and restore salmon stocks on the Yukon River Drainage.

- ii. Bristol Bay, Aleutians, and Alaska Peninsula Federal Subsistence Management Areas: Multiple stock of concerns exist in these areas; Nushagak Chinook salmon, Chignik Chinook salmon, Chignik early-run Sockeye salmon. The State monitors and manages all these fisheries under existing management plans and action plans. To conserve these species, stakeholders should expect restrictions in other fisheries to lessen bycatch on these stocks of

concern. Federal emergency special actions may be put in place, dependent upon the 2023 return of the stocks in coordination with the State of Alaska.

- iii. Cook Inlet Federal Subsistence Management Area: The State of Alaska has released multiple Emergency Orders and Press Releases for Cook Inlet affecting both Southern and Northern Kenai Peninsula Chinook producing streams and saltwater. These include preseason closures to the early and late-run Chinook salmon fisheries in the Kenai River. These closures will affect all user groups including the subsistence, personal-use, sport, eastside setnet commercial, and educational fisheries. In addition, current Federal regulation requires release of all live Chinook salmon caught in the Kenai River Federal Subsistence gillnet between July 1-15 if preseason projections are below the Optimum Escapement Goal (OEG). The projection is below the OEG for both runs.

- iv. Kuskokwim River Management Area: Every summer the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (YDNWR) is required to provide the Federal Subsistence Board (Board) with a notice of our intentions for salmon management for the season. The YDNWR and the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) have been in communication about the Kuskokwim River salmon situation since the end of the 2022 season. We also had a preliminary meeting with staff from both organizations on March 10, 2023, to discuss salmon conservation. Both organizations' staff agree that the salmon situation has gotten worse, not better, with historic lows in Coho Salmon returns, as well as continued declines in Chum and Chinook salmon numbers. In 2022, the local management team was entrenched in salmon management from June 1 through September 16. This was the longest conservation period for salmon on record and it was mainly due to the historically poor Coho salmon numbers that returned to the Kuskokwim. Both Federal and State of Alaska closures occurred during the summer in 2022. The managers for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) closed the Coho salmon fishery due to the low numbers counted outside Bethel, but also because weir data from the Kwethluk and Kogrukluks weirs were far short of their established escapement goals for that species. On September 16, 2022, the State opened the river to subsistence fishing.

At this point only preliminary estimates are available from the ADF&G, but our discussions have indicated agreement that we generally expect the salmon runs to be similar to last year's. Therefore, the YDNWR-KRITFC partnership is planning to use the Delegation of Authority from the Board to enact a Temporary Special Action (TSA) for the protection and conservation of Chinook, Chum, and Coho salmon in the Federal waters of the Kuskokwim and the salmon-spawning tributaries that connect to the Kuskokwim. The proposed action would include restrictions to the use of gill nets starting June 1, 2023. Though we feel it is more appropriate to use the TSA rather than an Emergency Special Action because of the length of these three salmon runs, we anticipate our actions will be very similar to the actions taken in 2022. The YDNWR and KRITFC will be in regular communication throughout the salmon season to analyze in-season salmon abundance data (including Traditional/Indigenous Knowledge, natural indicators, and local observations) and set subsistence harvest opportunities and conservation closures accordingly. As always, our highest management priorities are to use precautionary, conservation principles to balance protections for spawner escapement with meeting subsistence harvest needs.

- v. Yukon River Management Area: The official outlook will not be finalized until spring; however, preliminary Chinook and Chum salmon forecasts are for run sizes below escapement goals. The Chinook salmon drainage wide forecast is for a range of 62,000 to 104,000 with a midpoint forecast of 82,000 fish. A Chinook salmon run of this size is not expected to meet escapement goals. Additionally, Canadian-origin Chinook salmon are forecasted to be below the Interim Management Escapement goal of 42,500 to 55,000 fish.

The preliminary summer Chum salmon forecast is for a run size of 557,000 fish with a range of 280,000 to 900,000 fish. Although the upper half of the forecast is within the drainage wide escapement goal range of 500,000 to 1.2 million summer Chum salmon, managers are uncertain what effects the extreme water temperatures seen in 2019 had on this year's expected 4-year-old age class.

The preliminary fall Chum salmon forecast is for a run size of 251,000 fish with a range of 112,000 to 602,000 fish. The drainage wide escapement goal for fall Chum salmon is 300,000 to 600,000 fish. Like the summer Chum salmon run, managers are uncertain regarding the strength of this year's returning 4-year-old component. Unless the run comes in near the upper end of the forecast, a run of this size is unlikely to meet escapement goals including the 70,000 to 104,000 Canadian Interim Management Escapement Goal.

The Coho salmon run is forecasted to be below the average of 222,000 fish, but harvestable surpluses for this species may be available.

Based on recent trends and this year's forecasts, Yukon River Drainage salmon fishing will likely be closed, starting early in the season. If the runs continue to be poor, salmon fishing may be closed all season and fishers should plan to harvest other species with non-salmon gear, similar to 2022. If runs come in better than anticipated, fishing opportunities will be implemented based on the amount of surplus available. The Service will continue to offer government-to-government Tribal Consultation meetings. Pre-season Tribal Consultation meetings will be held for each district during the month of May or at the request of any Yukon River Tribal Government, and we encourage Tribal leaders to participate in these meetings.

The federally designated in-season fisheries managers for the Service and points of contacts for additional information are:

- Bristol Bay, Aleutians, and Alaska Peninsula Federal Subsistence Management Area: Jon Gerken, Fisheries Branch Chief, Southern Alaska Field Office, jonathon_gerken@fws.gov, 907-271-2776
- Cook Inlet Federal Subsistence management Area: Ken Gates, Supervisory Fisheries Biologist, Southern Alaska Field Office, kenneth_gates@fws.gov, 907-260-0126
- Kuskokwim River Management Area: Boyd Blihovde, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Manager, boyd_blihovde@fws.gov, 907-543-1002
- Yukon River Management Area: Holly Caroll, Yukon River Subsistence Fishery Manager/Fisheries and Aquatic Conservation Branch Manager, Northern Alaska Fish and Wildlife Field Office, holly_carroll@fws.gov, 907-786-3687