



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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In Reply Refer to:
FWS/R7/FES

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

The following information is a summary of the Federal fisheries updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service).

Federal in-season subsistence fisheries management

The Service has five Federal in-season managers with delegated authority from the Federal Subsistence Board (Board). All managers are delegated authority to issue emergency and temporary special actions when necessary to ensure the conservation of a healthy fish population, to continue subsistence uses of fish, for the continued viability of a fish population, or for public safety reasons. While most summer fisheries have concluded, there are still fall season fisheries taking place. Federal fisheries managers coordinate their management actions prior to implementation with representatives from the Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils, the Office of Subsistence Management (OSM), and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to the extent possible. While Federal managers have reported post-season information below, the ADF&G will publish post-season summaries. Final escapement counts are preliminary until published by the ADF&G. Final Federal fisheries reports from the delegated managers are submitted to the Federal Subsistence Board by November 15 of each year.

The Service continues to fulfill its subsistence management responsibilities and continues to recognize the loss of salmon that causes food insecurity as well as the loss of important traditional and cultural practices. We acknowledge these hardships and continue to partner with others to build a strong foundation for co-stewardship, where both Indigenous Knowledge and western science are brought to the table and to make immediate investments in the foundational science and projects that are needed to respond to the salmon crises and the health of the broader ecosystem.

Bristol Bay/Alaska Peninsula/Aleutian Islands/Chignik Areas:

All the assessments of salmon returns were conducted by the ADF&G and provided the basis for in-season assessment and management. Pre-season coordination efforts were focused on the Chinook Salmon and Sockeye Salmon subsistence fisheries in the Chignik River. The continued declines in Chignik River Chinook Salmon returns as well as recent low returns of early-run and late-run Sockeye Salmon have heightened management concerns for this fishery in the Chignik River.

All subsistence activities were summarized in the weekly reports to OSM. The ADF&G will issue post-season summaries for the Chignik, Bristol Bay, Alaska Peninsula, and Aleutian Islands. Final escapement counts are preliminary until published by the ADF&G.

Bristol Bay:

All projects met escapement goals excluding Nushagak Chinook Salmon.

Chignik:

The Chignik River final cumulative weir count was 851,295 Sockeye Salmon with 429,302 fish representing the late run. Both runs met escapement goals. The Chignik River weir was removed on August 27, 2023.

There were only 267 Chinook Salmon. The Chinook Salmon run did not meet the lower range of the escapement goal which is 1,300 fish.

Alaska Peninsula:

All projects met escapement goals, excluding the Bear River late run Sockeye Salmon where the lower end of the goal is 117,000 fish.

Aleutian Islands:

All fisheries were forecast to meet escapement goals and provide harvest opportunity.

Cook Inlet Area:

The 2023 Cook Inlet Federal subsistence fishing is nearing completion on the Kenai and Kasilof rivers. Regulatory dates for the Kasilof River community gillnet fishery are from June 16 through August 15, 2023. Regulatory periods for the Kenai River community gillnet fishery are from July 1 through August 15 and from September 10-30.

Seasons for subsistence fishing with rod and reel are the same as for the taking of fish under Alaska sport fishing regulations. Most of the initial rod and reel subsistence effort will be focused on Sockeye Salmon in the Upper Kenai and Russian Rivers.

Federal subsistence fishing permits were issued to 478 residents of Cooper Landing, Hope, Ninilchik, and Moose Pass. Permit types included general fishing, household, designated fisher, and community gillnet permits. To date, 5,936 Sockeye Salmon have been reported as being harvested in all fisheries between the Kasilof and Kenai rivers: 1,978 by gillnet in the Kasilof River; 2,771 by gillnet in the Kenai River; 56 by dip net in the Kasilof River; and 1,131 by dipnet at the Russian River falls through August 3, 2023.

No special actions were issued for Cook Inlet Federal fisheries. However, escapement remains very poor for Chinook Salmon returning to upper Cook Inlet. The early-run Chinook Salmon escapement was not met in the Kenai River with only 1,961 large fish passing the Alaska Department of Fish and Game sonar by June 30, 2023. Managers are closely monitoring the late-run Chinook Salmon escapement and Federal harvest of Chinook Salmon in the Kenai River and will take necessary action if warranted. The late-run of Chinook Salmon returning to the

Kenai River is currently not predicted to meet the established in-river escapement goal. Escapement is at 13,922 as of September 27, 2023.

Kuskokwim River Management Area:

Starting on June 1, 2023, the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (YDNWR) staff worked together with the ADF&G and the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) to manage Chinook, Chum, and Coho Salmon conservatively and collaboratively. During the 2023 season, the YDNWR-KRITFC collaborative fisheries management team made 10 harvest and/or regulation announcements providing for 18 unique subsistence fishing opportunities in Federal public waters on the Kuskokwim drainage. On August 11, 2023, the team released a Temporary Special Action (TSA) that relinquished Federal protection for salmon species in the Kuskokwim River effective August 13, 2023, at 11:59 pm.

The Chinook Salmon run was less robust than expected from the pre-season projections and compared to the 2022 run. The fisheries management team announced only three drift net opportunities directed at Chinook Salmon (four were announced in 2022). The salmon season is not yet complete, and the staff at ADF&G have not completed the 2023 run reconstruction. The Federal fisheries management team is encouraged by reports of strong Chinook Salmon harvests in headwaters communities (outside Federal jurisdiction) in part due to sacrifices made by the lower Kuskokwim subsistence fishers.

The Chum Salmon numbers for 2023 began building late and led to continued conservation closures during the Chum Salmon season as anticipated at the beginning of the season. Chum Salmon returns and harvests were marginally better numbers than the recent three years, but the stocks remain in a state of severe decline compared to historical returns. With cooperation from the KRITFC in-season managers, the Federal fisheries management team was able to target the healthy Sockeye Salmon run with several set gillnet opportunities for harvest. As the Chum run progressed and much of it had passed the lower river, fishing opportunities became more liberal to allow for additional harvest (especially targeting Sockeye).

In addition, the Sockeye run was targeted with alternative gear types. The use of dip nets was promoted by KRITFC, local users on social media, and local radio programming, which may have been part of the reason why dip-nets were heavily used around Bethel this season. The Coho Salmon season started early and gradually picked up good numbers, which led to the relinquishment of the salmon fishery back to ADF&G in mid-August. The YDNWR and KRITFC followed a precautionary approach to in-season management matching the level of uncertainty and data limitations managers faced about the Coho Salmon fishery, in accordance with our Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Strategy. The ADF&G Area Manager opened the Kuskokwim to all fishing and provided for a series of commercial catcher-seller opportunities once the Federal TSA was lifted on the evening of August 13, 2023.

Yukon River Management Area:

As anticipated, the 2023 Yukon River salmon season was very poor. The Chinook salmon was the second worst run on record, with only slightly higher run strength than 2022. The summer

chum salmon and fall chum salmon came in well below average but were a little better than 2022. Despite no directed salmon harvests, escapements for all species of Yukon River salmon were well below average and no drainage-wide escapement goals appear to have been met, including the Canadian border passage objectives for Chinook and fall chum salmon.

Subsistence salmon fishing was closed all season, and this marked the fourth year in a row for chum salmon closures and the third year in a row for full Chinook salmon closures. Managers allowed as much opportunity to harvest non-salmon species as possible. Retention of coho salmon, pink salmon and the rarer sockeye salmon were allowed, but these are not typically harvested in large numbers for subsistence use in the Yukon River Basin. Because subsistence fishing was closed, all other consumptive uses such as commercial, personal use, and sport fishing for salmon were also closed throughout the drainage. Subsistence harvest estimates will not be available until after household surveys are completed and results finalized by the ADF&G, typically in December. But it is likely that Yukon households will have experienced another year of record-low harvests. This represents the loss of over 190,000 salmon for approximately 2,500 households that live in the drainage. Salmon fishing closures were not taken lightly, and we recognize the severe hardship to subsistence fishermen in the loss of meals and traditional and spiritual practices these closures represent.

Alaska Native Tribal and Stakeholders Concerns:

During the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFFA) calls every week, people often expressed the hardship of not subsistence or commercial fishing, not having ways to maintain their traditional camps, as well as the high cost of food and other food security issues. A topic that seemed to come up most frequently, was marine bycatch of salmon. Stakeholders want more information on the bycatch that is occurring in the National Marine Fisheries Service-managed fisheries guided by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council), and more information about the genetic composition and catch data of salmon caught in the Area M ADF&G-managed fisheries. There continues to be concerns shared about the lack of equity of having subsistence fishing in river closed, which is a priority use in both State and Federal management regulation, and yet harvest (bycatch) of Western Alaska stocks continues in commercial fisheries (in the marine environment). Discussions focused on the need to control or limit bycatch for Chinook and chum salmon, and there were many questions about what the Service is doing about this issue. Stakeholders want regular data summaries of fish caught, specifically, they want more information on how much of the catch may be bound for the Yukon River drainage. The Yukon Federal management team doesn't readily compile reports on these marine fisheries and are ill-prepared to answer detailed questions. Having someone more familiar with the data and Council work covering this topic, such as Diana Stram and other Council staff who provide data at Regional Advisory Council meetings, in-season YRDFFA calls, and other Yukon-specific meetings has been very helpful. Their ability to field questions, listen to Stakeholder concerns and respond to data requests has been beneficial. We also have been encouraging concerned fishermen to voice concerns and attend the Council meetings during relevant bycatch topics.

Kodiak Area:

Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge staff provided Federal Subsistence Activity Reports for the spring and fall meetings of the Kodiak/Aleutians Regional Advisory Council, and staff participated in both meetings.

Due to the poor Chinook salmon returns on the Karluk and Ayakulik Rivers, ADF&G restricted sport fishing on these drainages, E.O. No. 2-KS-4-19-23.

Karluk did not meet the escapement goal of 3,000 Chinook salmon and Ayakulik did not meet the escapement goal of 4,000 Chinook salmon. In 2023, Karluk had 379 salmon return and Ayakulik had 590 salmon return. The Karluk River has reached the lower escapement goal four times in the last ten years and the Ayakulik has reached the lower escapement goal one time in the last ten years.

There was one Federal Special Action within the Kodiak Management Area during the 2023 season, in conjunction with adjacent State waters.

The Special Action, 9-RS-01-23, was taken on June 17th to conserve Buskin River Sockeye. In 2023, Buskin had 1,757 salmon return; the lower escapement goal is 5,000 sockeye salmon. The Buskin River has reached the lower escapement goal seven times in the last ten years.

Federally designated in-season fisheries managers:

- Bristol Bay/Alaska Peninsula/Aleutian Islands/Chignik Areas 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: Laurie Boeck, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Acting Refuge Manager, laurie_boeck@fws.gov, 907-543-1002
- Yukon River Management Area: Holly Carroll, 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
- Kodiak Management Area: Mike Brady, Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge Manager, michael_brady@fws.gov, 907-487-0226

Staffing Updates:

Mr. Aaron Martin has taken a new position as the National Invasive Species Coordinator and is no longer the point of contact for the Service. Assistant Regional Director, Fisheries and Ecological Services, Mr. Pete Fasbender continues in his role as the alternate for the Alaska Regional Director, Sara Boario.