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-6: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council), March 2024.

Federal Subsistence Management Program All-Council Meeting

The Federal Subsistence Management Program and Office of Subsistence Management (OSM) hosted a meeting an All-Council meeting for all ten Federal Regional Advisory Councils (RAC) in Anchorage on March 5-8, 2024. In addition to meeting Federal Subsistence Board members, hearing regional reports, and attending training sessions, council members held discussions on key topics of concern to different RACs.

Concerns over the salmon returns to freshwater systems that sustain subsistence users throughout much of Alaska were repeatedly raised. Questions on what actions the Federal Subsistence Board and management agencies are taking to understand and address issues such as bycatch, competition from hatchery fish, as well as impacts in the freshwater system were clearly heard. The Service continues to urge the NOAA and NPFMC to engage with subsistence users and others to help address and understand these issues.

Co-Stewardship Symposium

A Co-Stewardship Symposium was held in Fairbanks in mid-January. The meeting was well attended by a diverse group of Tribal representatives, conservation organizations and agency staff from all areas of Alaska. The focus of the meeting was building relationships and a better understanding of what co-stewardship and co-management means in Alaska. There was much consensus that there is a need for increased Indigenous representation in all areas of resource management, on councils, and any bodies making decisions about fish and wildlife resources. A key takeaway for Service staff was also the need for us to think of fish and wildlife management from a broader ecological perspective, not just in the discreet units defined by the western systems used currently. Similarly, there was a clear request to elevate Indigenous Knowledge as part of all management frameworks, including fisheries.

Chinook/Chum Genetics

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Conservation Genetics Laboratory continues to work closely with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's (ADF&G) Genetics Laboratory providing stock apportionment in-season to Yukon fishery managers. We analyze chum salmon for Canadian apportionment, while the State of Alaska analyzes Chinook samples. Both labs work cooperatively to refine techniques, increase resolution of the information provided, and ensure this key management information is rapidly available – usually 24-48 hours after receiving the samples.

Significant new genetics work is also being funded through the gravel-to-gravel initiative. Both the Yukon and Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish commissions have developed collaborative projects with partners at National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Auke Bay Lab, ADF&G's Genetics Lab, and the University of Alaska-Fairbanks' School of Fisheries and Ocean Science. The first, Genomics-Based Western Chum Salmon Stock Identification Project, aims to differentiate large populations of summer and fall chum salmon in the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Nushagak rivers. The work will be guided by local and Indigenous Knowledge in the region which can help identify populations that can be distinguished by outward characteristics, interpret the geographic patterns in genetic structures, and highlight ways in which this information could eventually be used in management.

The same partners are also working on a project to improve stock identification methods for Western Alaska Chinook salmon populations. This project will develop a proof of concept for combining the complementary information archived in otoliths with genetics data to achieve the highest spatial resolution possible for assigning fish to their river of origin. In addition to generating Chinook salmon genetic and otolith strontium databases, this approach could ultimately be used to assign Chinook salmon caught in marine fisheries to different stocks throughout western Alaska. This would allow more precise management of marine fisheries that impact salmon stocks which support subsistence fishing communities throughout the region.

Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative

Gravel to Gravel continues to form and build relationships with Tribes and fish commissions, across Department of Interior (DOI) bureaus, State of Alaska, NOAA, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This initiative seeks to implement projects, avoid duplication, and encourage the pooling of resources and expertise, while working towards objectives around co-stewardship/management. In addition to the genetics projects described above, three other areas have been selected for initial funding. We are working with the applicants to ensure robust investigation and data management plans are developed.

1. Kawerak Inc. (through the Nome Eskimo Community)

This grant will build capacity at two western Alaska organizations – the Nome Eskimo Community Tribe and the non-profit Alaska Native organization Kawerak, Inc. Project funds will be used to create new positions at both organizations: a Fisheries Biologist at Kawerak, and a Fisheries Advocate at Nome Eskimo Community. Both positions will coordinate with each other and work on behalf of all Tribes of the region. Funds will also be used to document and evaluate previous and ongoing mining activities in the region that have potential to impact salmon habitat, and to undertake an environmental baseline study of the Imuruk Basin area, an important fish, wildlife, and subsistence use area.

In addition, these staff will advise the organizations and other Tribes in the region on fisheries-related policy and management issues at state, federal and international levels, will participate in fisheries-related meetings to gather information and to share regional information, may participate in or support various fisheries-related research activities in the region, and will

actively work with region Tribal members to understand regional fisheries concerns and opportunities.

2. Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (on behalf of the Kuskokwim Corporation)

This project aims to support and expand the capacity of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) through additional staff and contract assistance. This will allow KRITFC to continue work on restoring and rebuilding declined salmon populations, support the initiation or expansion of applied research, stock assessment and environmental monitoring projects and activities. Funds will also be used to continue supporting the ongoing Salmon Restoration, Rebuilding and Monitoring Project.

3. Tanana Chiefs Conference and Yukon River Intertribal Fish Commission (through the Village of Eagle)

An Executive Director will be hired for the Yukon River Intertribal Fish Commission (YRITFC) who will be responsible for the day-to-day operations, administration, and management of the Fish Commission to include strategic planning, policy development, budget management, staff management and supervision, oversight of work plans, and long-term management plans. Funding will also be provided to build capacity and facilitate greater tribal engagement and participation in fishery management and regulatory meetings.

Chum Salmon Bycatch

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is supportive of the Council's work to evaluate potential options to mitigate Chum salmon bycatch. This issue is a significant concern to the Service and subsistence fishers throughout Alaska. We encourage the Council to ensure all stakeholders and tribal entities have adequate opportunity to provide meaningful input to the Environmental Impact Statement and alternative selection.