



C3 Cook Inlet Salmon

February Council Meeting 2024

Action Memo

Council Staff: Dr. Nicole Watson

Other Presenters: Dr. Richard Brenner (NOAA), Dr. Lukas DeFilippo (AFSC), Doug Duncan (NOAA), Gretchen Harrington (NOAA), Josh Fortenbery (NOAA)

Action Required:

1. Review the 2024 Preliminary Salmon Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for the Salmon Fisheries of the Cook Inlet Exclusive Economic Zone Area (SAFE).
2. Approve the SAFE
3. Recommend Final 2024 harvest specifications including:
 - a. The tier level for each stock and the appropriate buffer;
 - b. Overfishing Level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks as recommended by the SSC; and
 - c. Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for each species.

BACKGROUND

At this meeting, the Council will review and approve the 2024 Preliminary Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for the Salmon Fisheries of the Cook Inlet Exclusive Economic Zone Area; and make final recommendations on the 2024 harvest specifications for each of the salmon stocks. Once NMFS receives the SSC and Council recommendations, NMFS will publish proposed and final harvest specifications in the Federal Register.

SAFE Report

This is the first SAFE for the Federal salmon fisheries in the Cook Inlet exclusive economic zone (EEZ) Area. The SAFE provides the information for the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to recommend status determination criteria (SDC) and the Council to recommend TACs for the salmon harvested in the EEZ salmon fisheries for the 2024 fishing season. The SAFE also provides proposed specifications for SSC and Council consideration.

For 2024, this SAFE provides the best available scientific information on the biological condition of salmon stocks in Cook Inlet and builds on the information and analysis in the Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review (EA/RIR) prepared for Amendment 16 and the proposed implementing regulations. The EA/RIR also provides information on the social and economic condition of the sport, subsistence, personal use, and commercial fisheries, the fish processing industries, and communities in Cook Inlet, and this social and economic information is incorporated in the SAFE by reference.

This SAFE uses the tier system and harvest specifications process in proposed Amendment 16 to the Salmon FMP to calculate the SDC following the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and the National Standard 1 guidelines. NMFS prepared this SAFE as part of the process to federally manage the salmon fisheries in the Cook Inlet EEZ. NMFS published a proposed rule and notice of availability for proposed Amendment 16 on October 18, 2023 (88 FR 72314). NMFS is required to implement regulations for this fishery by May 1, 2024, under a court order.

OFLs, ABCs, TACs

The NOAA SAFE Team recommendations to the SSC and Council are included in the Executive Summary of the SAFE report and are as follows:

Stock	Tier	OFL (# fish)	Buffer	ABC and ACL (# fish)
Kenai River Late Run Sockeye salmon	1	1,363,932	0.478	652,454
Kasilof River Sockeye salmon	1	623,084	0.694	432,578
Aggregate Other Sockeye salmon	3	887,464	0.20	177,493
Kenai River Late Run Large Chinook salmon	<i>Included as part of a combined, Aggregate Chinook salmon stock</i>			
Aggregate Chinook salmon	3	2,697	0.167	450
Aggregate Coho salmon	3	357,688	0.10	35,769
Aggregate Chum salmon	3	441,727	0.50	220,864
Aggregate Pink salmon	3	270,435	0.90	243,392

The SSC can recommend alternative buffers. The buffer refers to the multiplier (b) used to define ABC and OFL, rather than the difference between ABC and the OFL (1 – b).

The NOAA SAFE Team recommends that the annual catch limit (ACL) for each stock be at or below the recommended ABCs. The FMP specifies that the TAC for individual species be equal to the ACL or sum of ACL; as such, for sockeye salmon, the sum of the ACLs would be **1,262,525** fish. When summed across all species, the recommended 2024 TAC would be approximately **1,763,000** salmon.

For Tier 1 and 2 stocks, the lower bound of the State of Alaska’s spawning escapement goal is used for establishing available yield (potential EEZ harvest after the achievement of spawning escapement goals), which is the basis for the preseason OFLs and resulting ABC, ACL, and TAC. Should S_{MSY} or another estimate be used instead of the lower bound of the escapement goal, estimates of available yield and associated harvest specifications would be reduced from those recommended in this SAFE.

The Council can consider additional adjustments to species-level TACs, including buffers to account for new management of the fishery (e.g., species-level buffers for the first year(s) of the Federal fishery), and to account for other social, economic, and ecological factors.

The NOAA SAFE Team recommended SDC and harvest specifications based on sources of uncertainty and the biological attributes of the species being assessed; however, additional sources of uncertainty were not factored into the 2024 recommendations, including: the inability to confirm historical estimates of salmon harvests in the Cook Inlet EEZ Area (which are a substantial basis for the 2024 recommendations); the level of participation in the 2024 EEZ salmon fishery; the spatial distribution of fishing effort within the Cook Inlet EEZ Area in 2024 and effects of that effort on harvests of weaker stocks (Chinook and coho in particular); harvests and harvest rates for individual stocks and species given the new management structure of having both State and Federal salmon fisheries in UCI. There are likely other sources of uncertainty that were also not accounted for in the SAFE recommendations. To the extent practicable, the NOAA SAFE Team will incorporate additional sources of uncertainty into future analyses and welcomes input on assumptions, estimates, and analyses used in the 2024 SAFE.