



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Fish and Game

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September 15, 2026

Jon Kurland, Administrator
NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region
PO Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

Dear Mr. Kurland:

In April 2015, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) adopted an action that lowers Chinook salmon bycatch caps in the Bering Sea walleye pollock fishery when Chinook salmon abundance in Western Alaska is at historically low levels.¹ The Council's action identifies historically low Western Alaskan Chinook salmon abundance using a three-system index of inriver adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim rivers combined at or below the threshold level of 250,000 fish. The Council's action also specified a process by which the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (department) would provide postseason abundance estimates to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) by October 1, following the salmon season each year. If the threshold is not met, the low performance standard and hard cap applicable to the Bering Sea walleye pollock fishery is in effect the following year.

Methods and analyses used by the department to estimate the postseason run size for each of the three systems have been approved by the Council, and there were no substantive changes to those methods in 2026. The methods used for the Unalakleet and Upper Yukon rivers are consistent with what is outlined in the Council's public review analysis.² Methods used for the Kuskokwim River were approved by the Council in June 2018³ and last updated in 2025 to include additional inriver run abundance metrics.

The 2026 three-system index of inriver adult Chinook salmon run sizes from the Unalakleet, Upper Yukon, and Kuskokwim rivers is 155,860 and is below the threshold level of 250,000.

The following details the preliminary total run estimates for each system:

Unalakleet River

An extremely low run size of 888 Unalakleet River Chinook salmon returned in 2026. The preliminary estimate was based on the sum of reported commercial harvest, expected subsistence harvest, and preliminary estimated total escapement. Limited commercial fishing opportunity for chum and coho

¹ <https://npfmc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2237783&GUID=89E4DA9C-19B8-4BDE-8643-B19D68DD9EE3>

² Public Review draft Environmental Assessment/ Regulatory Impact Review/ Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis for Proposed Amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for Bering Sea Aleutian Islands Groundfish Bering Sea Chinook and Chum salmon bycatch management measures, March 2015.

³ <https://npfmc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=3486558&GUID=81056FD0-C9E8-4376-BD59-C2F6084C82E9&Options=ID|Text|&Search=Kuskokwim>

salmon was provided in Norton Sound Subdistrict 6 (Unalakleet Subdistrict) during the 2026 season. A total of 11 Chinook salmon were incidentally harvested and retained but not sold by commercial fishers. The department expects approximately 80 Unalakleet River Chinook salmon were harvested for subsistence uses in 2026, based on the assumption that harvest levels were consistent with those reported in 2025 (75 fish) when similar harvest restrictions were in place. Only partial assessment of the Unalakleet River escapement was possible in 2026.⁴ The North River Tower operated successfully during much of the season, and estimates were made for periods of missed passage. A drainagewide estimate of escapement was developed by expanding the North River tower count (410; 95% CI⁵: 410–418) by the historical (1997, 1998, 2009–2019, 2021–2024) average contribution (51%) of the North River to the total. The preliminary expanded total escapement of Chinook salmon to the Unalakleet River was estimated to be 888 (range: 446–1,606)⁶ and is considered highly uncertain.

Upper Yukon River

An extremely low run size of 37,161 Upper Yukon River Chinook salmon returned in 2026. The preliminary total run size estimate is based on the inseason assessment of passage into Canada and expectations of the total harvest in Alaska. Chinook salmon passage into Canada was based on a sonar project operated near the U.S./Canada border, downriver from Eagle, Alaska. The preliminary end-of-season Eagle sonar count is 35,661 fish (90% CI: 35,278–36,044). The total harvest of Upper Yukon River Chinook salmon in Alaska is expected to be about 1,500 fish. There were no commercial salmon fisheries in the Yukon River drainage in 2026, and relevant sport and personal use fisheries were closed. Subsistence gillnet fishing was limited to the use of small mesh nets ($\leq 4''$) directed at non-salmon, except for a nearly three-week period coinciding with the peak of the Chinook salmon run when all gillnets were removed from the water. Subsistence salmon fishing was limited to use of selective gear to harvest abundant summer chum salmon, but Chinook salmon were required to be released alive. The preliminary 2026 run size estimate exceeded the preseason forecast (22,000–33,000) but was near the lower confidence bounds of the inseason run size estimate (45,000; 90% CI: 27,000–62,000), based on an independent sonar program operated in the lower portion of the Yukon River and historical genetic stock estimates.

Kuskokwim River

A below-average total run size of 117,811 (95% CI: 105,728–129,893) Chinook salmon returned to the Kuskokwim River in 2026. This preliminary estimate was based on results of a maximum likelihood model⁷ informed by sonar-based inriver run estimates, direct observations of escapement, and an expectation of drainagewide harvest. The preliminary escapement of 87,251 (95% CI: 75,168–99,333) Chinook salmon is based on information from the Kuskokwim River mainstem sonar project, one tributary weir project, and six tributary aerial surveys. High water and poor survey conditions prevented the department from obtaining reliable escapement information from most weirs and a subset of aerial surveys during the 2026 season. The total harvest of Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon is expected to be 30,560. Nearly all harvest occurred in the subsistence fishery, and minimal harvest occurred in test fisheries operated by the department and collaborators. No commercial or sport harvest of Kuskokwim

⁴ The Unalakleet River weir was permanently discontinued prior to the 2025 season. Drainagewide escapement will be based on expanded North River tower counts consistent with historical run reconstruction methods employed by ADF&G and used by the Council to establish the 3-System Index.

⁵ CI: confidence interval

⁶ The range of likely drainagewide escapement values was based on the 95% CI of the North River tower estimate and the full range of historical observed contributions of the North River tower to the total escapement (26%–92%).

⁷ The Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon run reconstruction model was updated to include input from a mainstem sonar and two additional weirs. Larson and Hamazaki ([2024 Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon run reconstruction and 2025 forecast](#)) provide a summary of the revised model structure and demonstrate that the median total run estimates are largely insensitive to the model changes.

River Chinook salmon occurred during the 2026 season, and subsistence fishing restrictions were implemented throughout the Chinook salmon run. A preliminary estimate of drainagewide subsistence harvest was generated using a 10-year relationship between partial inseason harvest estimates and drainagewide post season estimates. The 2026 inseason harvest estimate was produced by the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, through collaboration in data collection efforts with the Orutsararmiut Native Council and the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. Post-season estimates were developed by the department. The preliminary total run size of Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon is below the preseason run forecast of 128,000–200,000 and consistent with the inseason total run estimate of approximately 114,000, based on a sonar project operated near Bethel, Alaska plus harvest downriver.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. Lang' or similar, written in a cursive style.

Doug Vincent-Lang
Commissioner

cc: Rachel Baker, Deputy Commissioner, Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Diana Evans, Executive Director North Pacific Fishery Management Council