

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

AGENDA C-6
Supplemental
OCTOBER 2013

P.O. Box 1467 • Bethel, AK 99559 • 907-543-2433 • 907-543-2021 fax

September 6, 2013

Mr. Eric Olson, Chair
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501

Re: Agenda Item C-6
RECEIVED
SEP 13 2013

Dear Mr. Olson:

The Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (Working Group) was formed in 1988 by the Alaska Board of Fisheries to provide stakeholders an active role in salmon management and works to sustain our salmon resources. The Working Group consists of voting members representing Elders and subsistence fishers along the river, processors, commercial fishers, sport fishers, Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Committees and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. We are writing on behalf of the Working Group to inform you about our Chinook salmon conservation and food security crisis on our river and to request that the Council continue to reduce Chinook salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea.

Healthy and abundant Chinook salmon are essential to the cultural, nutritional, and economic well-being and way of life on the Kuskokwim River. The subsistence salmon fishery in the Kuskokwim is one of the largest and most important subsistence fisheries in North America. The Kuskokwim River has experienced below average Chinook salmon returns, missed escapement goals, and subsistence restrictions since 2010.

In 2010 the Kuskokwim River experienced the lowest estimated total run and lowest spawning escapement of Chinook salmon on record. Late subsistence restrictions were imposed to protect tributaries of concern. In 2011, the Kuskokwim River experienced the second lowest estimated total run and spawning escapement of Chinook salmon. The Kwethluk and Tuluksak rivers did not meet Chinook salmon sustainable escapement goals for the fourth and fifth consecutive years, respectively. The George River did not meet its escapement goal in 2011, nor had the escapement goal been met in three of the previous four years. Only one tributary (of four with weir based escapement goals), achieved the escapement goal in 2011. Pre-season actions were taken on those tributaries experiencing chronic low returns. In-season, a late three-day subsistence closure to protect tributaries was followed by a Federal Management Action which closed subsistence salmon fishing within the Federal Conservation Unit for an additional three days.

In 2012, the Kuskokwim River experienced a new lowest return on record with an preliminary estimated return of Chinook salmon and the lowest subsistence harvest of Chinook salmon on record of about 20,000 (about 1/4 of the average subsistence harvest). Escapement objectives were generally achieved, but only at the expense of the subsistence harvest. In 2012 there were 35 days of restrictions including 12 continuous days of closure, and a significant reduction of subsistence harvest. On

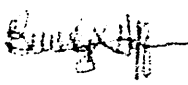
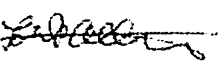

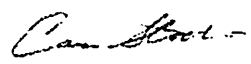
September 13, 2012, the Acting U.S. Secretary of Commerce Rebecca Blank declared a commercial fisheries disaster for the Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon for 2011-2012 in response to extremely low returns.

For the 2013, a new drainage-wide escapement goal of 65,000-120,000 Chinook salmon was established based on a Kuskokwim Chinook salmon run reconstruction. This new goal is much lower than the average escapement of about 150,000 Chinook. Escapement goals for the tributaries—the George, Kogrukluk, and Kwethuk Rivers—were reduced to be in proportion with new drainage wide goal and the Tuluksak escapement goal was eliminated.

In 2013, Chinook salmon escapement could very well be by far the lowest Chinook salmon escapement on record. The Bethel Test Fishery was by far the lowest on record. Not a single weir based tributary escapement goal was met for Chinook salmon nor is it likely that the drainage-wide escapement goal will have been met. Furthermore, all but one tributary had the lowest return on record. The Kogrukluk River, the large Chinook Chinook salmon producer on the Kuskokwim, had a preliminary escapement estimate that was 35% of the lower end of the escapement goal range. Pre-season tributary restrictions were implemented similar to 2011 and 2012 and late subsistence gear restrictions were imposed. The Working Group called an Emergency meeting to impose restrictions and a post-season meeting to develop solutions to the king salmon crisis. Several middle river tribes have signed formal resolutions calling for conservation measures.

Given the conservation and food security concerns on the Kuskokwim River, we are requesting that the Council continue to work to reduce Chinook salmon bycatch. Considering the continued poor returns of Chinook salmon, failure to meet escapement goals, an Chinook salmon crisis's of 2012 and 2013 our stocks cannot afford impacts from additional known sources of mortality, such as bycatch. At this point in time, every single fish counts, and it would be devastating to our runs if the 60,000 Chinook salmon permissible under the current cap were caught as bycatch. Bycatch must be reduced to protect Western Alaska Chinook salmon and to provide for the nutritional, cultural, and economic needs of the Kuskokwim communities.

Sincerely,

				
Beverly Hoffman KRSMWG co-chair 543-3239 bev@kuskofish.com	Lamont Albertson KRSMWG co-chair 675-4380 trout@svic.net	Fritz Charles KRSMWG co-chair	Mark Leary KRSMWG co-chair 545-2877 napaimute@gci.net	Casie Stockdale KRSMWG co-chair 543-7341 cstockdale@avcp.org