



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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In Reply Refer to:
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Report # B-7: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, December 2022.

The following information is a summary of the major updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that the Service is involved in related to the affairs of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council).

I. Federal in-season subsistence fisheries management

- i. Alaska Region update: Record-low salmon returns to Western and Interior Alaska have increased the need to conserve and restore the viability of wild salmon. Subsistence harvests have been severely curtailed over the last several years, resulting in hardships on federally qualified subsistence users who have a direct dependence upon salmon. To minimize in-river bycatch during periods of low salmon returns, the Service has been working with Alaska Native Tribes and other stakeholders for over 20 years to alter fishing methods and means. The Council and the marine commercial fishing fleet has reduced marine bycatch of salmon; however further efforts are warranted to reduce salmon bycatch, especially during times of low wild Chinook and chum salmon productivity and related restrictions on subsistence fishing. To this end, the Service is evaluating how to better engage with the Council, Alaska Native Tribes, and salmon stakeholders on marine bycatch and marine/freshwater ecosystem management. The Service appreciates the Council recently appointing the Salmon Bycatch Committee composed of agency, Alaska Native Tribal entities, and commercial fishing industry representatives. This is a positive step towards incorporating the perspectives and experiences of Alaska Native Tribes in the Council process and will improve the mutual understanding of efforts to minimize salmon bycatch and the impacts bycatch has in-river fishers. We wish to stay informed of the Committee's work and at this time Mr. Aaron Martin is our point of contact.
- ii. Chignik Federal Subsistence Management Area: Chinook salmon escapement goals were not met in the Chignik Management Area in 2013, 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, and 2022. Escapement goals for the early-run sockeye salmon were not met in the Chignik Management Area in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021. Early-run sockeye salmon are listed as a stock of concern and Chinook salmon are under consideration to be listed as a stock of concern by the State Board of Fisheries. Federal subsistence users support any actions by the Council that allow additional fish to the reach spawning grounds.
- iii. Cook Inlet Federal Subsistence Management Area: Chinook salmon returns to federally managed portions of rivers in Cook Inlet remain low and have required Federal and State

managers to take restrictive actions since 2012. Specifically, the Kenai River has been unable to meet in-river escapement goals for Chinook salmon and as a result Kenai River Chinook salmon stocks are under consideration by the State Board of Fisheries to be listed as stocks of management concern.

- iv. Kodiak Management Area: Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) staff provided Federal Subsistence Activity Reports for the spring and fall meetings of the Kodiak/Aleutians Regional Advisory Council (RAC), and staff participated in both meetings. During the winter meeting NWR staff, with assistance from the Office of Subsistence Management, requested to make administrative and regulatory changes to Federal subsistence fishing in the Kodiak Management Area (KMA) regulations. The changes were to clarify and assist the public to better understand the regulations and geographical area when requesting a Federal Fishing Permit. The Custom and Traditional request for the U.S. Coast Guard members was submitted to align with State subsistence and the Federal subsistence of wildlife. The RAC board did not accept any of the clarifying requests. There were three Special Actions within the KMA during the 2022 season, in conjunction with adjacent State waters.

The Special Action, 9-RS-01-22, was taken on June 1, 2022, to conserve Buskin River Sockeye salmon. The action was rescinded on July 2 with Special Action 9-RS 02-22. The special Action, 9-SS-03-22, was taken on September 22 to conserve Buskin River coho salmon.

- v. Kuskokwim River Management Area: Subsistence users along the Kuskokwim River failed to meet their subsistence needs due to low numbers of Chinook, chum, and coho salmon in 2022. Restrictions to protect Chinook, chum, and coho salmon in 2022 was the most restricted in the history of the Kuskokwim River fishery. These restrictions made it hard on users to trying to harvest relatively healthy populations of sockeye salmon and whitefish. The salmon returns in the Kuskokwim River was once strong enough to provide for a commercial salmon fishery. Today, no buyer is interested and restrictions on subsistence fishing is deemed necessary to conserve the long-term viability of the three species mentioned above. Critical Chinook salmon escapement goals were met again in 2022, because of the Kuskokwim River subsistence communities continued sacrifices and conservation efforts. Recent increases in the returns of sockeye salmon is the sole positive news in the fishery.

During the 2022 season, the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (YDNWR) worked closely with the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to manage Chinook and chum salmon in the Kuskokwim River.

Five emergency special actions were issued by the Federal in-season manager (manager) for the 2022 salmon season. During the June 1 to 11 front-end closure three 16-hour set gillnet opportunities were provided. After the front-end closure, there were four 12-hour set and drift net opportunities and four set net only opportunities resulting in 200 hours of fishing during the June and July fishing season. All fishing opportunities were limited to 6-inch or less gillnets to conserve larger Chinook salmon, which are predominately female.

The 2022 season was similar in many ways to the 2021 season, except for coho salmon. The lower coho salmon returns are a disappointment for subsistence fishers in the Kuskokwim River.

Despite numerous challenges during the salmon season, the 2022 salmon situation was handled as well as could be expected. Federally qualified subsistence residents that fished during 2022 were overwhelmingly happy with this year's harvest opportunities during the Chinook salmon run. The June 22 opportunity was especially satisfying for lower river fishers who made up most of the 14,000 estimated harvest. This record single day federally managed harvest of Chinook salmon was not a goal for the in-season managers, but the successful harvest took a lot of pressure off managers and allowed subsistence users a chance to focus on food preparation after the large number was caught. The sockeye salmon run also took some pressure off the chum salmon run, which was once-again low. Managers with the YDNWR and KRITFC devised a plan to allow for some fishing that targeted the plentiful sockeye, but partially protected Chinook and chum salmon. The plan was only a partial success and difficult planning will continue to take place in future years to look for ways to allow for gill net fishing while protecting other species.

As mentioned above, the 2022 coho salmon run was a shock to local subsistence users and to fisheries managers. This season marked a milestone that required YDNWR staff to remain engaged in the salmon fishery through the end of August. Although Federal restrictions were not implemented, a great deal of planning and conversation took place with the KRITFC and ADF&G to ensure coho salmon were adequately protected. The challenges that came up this season were related to the timing of the run and the lack of biological escapement goals for the species. Coho salmon have been taken for granted in previous years, largely due to their reliably strong numbers that even allowed for a routine harvest of up to 400,000 fish annually. Recently, the coho salmon run has not been as reliable, and there's more concern for their preservation. In fact, the ADF&G has been running their fisheries assessment projects later into the Fall (until September 24 this season) for this very reason. The fact that coho salmon run late into the Fall and Winter is a challenge for fisheries managers, and one that can't be controlled. However, a challenge we can control is the improvement of both tributary and drainage-wide escapement goals that reflect an ecosystem approach to conservation. The current tributary goals for the Kogrukluk and the Kwethluk Rivers are vital, but additional biological goals should be set for fisheries managers to have solid benchmarks to aim for during in-season management.

Alaska Native Tribal and Stakeholder Concerns

Tribal consultations conducted by the YDNWR in 2022 indicated the public's extreme frustration with commercial fishing in the Bering Sea and amounts of bycatch allowed. These catastrophic salmon declines threaten food, cultural, spiritual, and economic security in the Kuskokwim River Basin, and they demand attention and immediate action by all management entities and there is a need for new conservation-based and ecosystem-wide management approach, particularly in their marine environment.

- vi. Yukon River Management Area: As anticipated, the 2022 Yukon River salmon season was very poor. The Chinook salmon was the worst run on record. The summer chum salmon,

fall chum salmon, and coho salmon runs came in well below average but were a little better than 2021, which had the worst runs on record. Despite no directed salmon harvests, escapements for all species of Yukon River salmon were well below average and no established escapement goals appear to have been met, including the Canadian border passage objective for Chinook and fall chum salmon.

Subsistence salmon fishing was closed all season, and this marked the third year in a row for chum salmon closures and the second 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 Stakeholder 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. However, the main 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 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 Yukon Rivers. 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 provide data at RAC 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.

The federally designated in-season fisheries managers for the Service and points of contacts for additional information are:

- Chignik 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: Boyd Blihovde, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Manager, boyd_blihovde@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