



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 2021.

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

I. Federal Subsistence Salmon Management

Throughout much of Alaska, the Service works closely with the State of Alaska and stakeholders to provide in-river subsistence opportunities for salmon and other subsistence fish species. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) Title VIII acknowledges the importance of sound management principles; the importance of conservation of healthy populations of fish; and “the continuation of the opportunity for subsistence uses by rural residents of Alaska.” The ANILCA also states that each National Wildlife Refuge “conserve fish and wildlife populations and their habitats in their natural diversity.” Furthermore, the National Wildlife Refuge System’s Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health Policy states “We will, first and foremost, maintain existing levels of biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health at the refuge scale. Secondly, we will restore lost or severely degraded elements of integrity, diversity, environmental health at the refuge scale and other appropriate landscape scales where it is feasible...”

Overall, the 2021 salmon returns were unprecedented for most of the freshwater salmon fisheries for which the Service has a management role. For example, the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River Chinook salmon runs came in below the historical averages while Chum salmon returns were the lowest on record. The fall Chum salmon returns were considered critically low by fisheries managers in the Yukon River Basin. The record low salmon runs in the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River Basins left Federal managers with little to no projected harvestable surplus above what was needed to escape to the spawning grounds. As a result, many in-river fisheries were severely curtailed or closed completely. For instance, within the Kuskokwim River Basin, communities were only able to meet less than 30 percent of their long-term Chinook salmon harvest needs. The 2021 Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon harvest reflects a decline of 72 percent compared to the long-term average harvest for the period 1976-2009. As far as food-security is concerned, 2021 is the 11th year in a row when long-term subsistence harvest needs in the Kuskokwim River Basin have not been met.

Closures on these stocks were not taken lightly, and the Service recognizes the severe hardship to subsistence fishers in the loss of meals and traditional practices that these closures represent.

The Service also recognizes the loss to the ecosystem services that salmon returns support such as critical marine derived nutrients for bears, birds, and riparian plants. The extent of the impacts to the biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health of Service trust resources are not yet fully understood.

The Service is currently working with partners to analyze data from multiple sources to develop initial 2022 projections for adult salmon returns to the Kuskokwim River and Yukon River Basins. Juvenile salmon research in the Bering Sea has led to an effective model for forecasting adult returns of Chinook salmon to the Yukon River Basin 3 years ahead. This model has been quite accurate and is indicating the 2022 run may be similar or smaller than the run size in 2021. Unfortunately, we do not have Bering Sea juvenile-based forecasts for Chum salmon, although researchers are exploring forecasting models for Chum salmon. It may be that the Chum salmon runs will be poor for up to 2 more years based on the year-class failures we've experienced in 2020, and 2021. Federal managers are anticipating similar patterns for Chum and Chinook salmon in the Kuskokwim River.

In closing, the Service acknowledges the hardship the 2021 season caused on fishing families in Western Alaska and we thank them for their collaboration and patience during these challenging times. The Service also recognizes the Council's efforts to work with stakeholders in the marine environment to minimize the unintended harvest of salmon to help restore Chinook and Chum salmon returns in Western Alaska. To achieve this, the Service looks forward to working with other Council members and stakeholders to further identify and address data and communication gaps.

II. Change of Service Representation to the Council

Greg Siekaniec retired as the Regional Director this summer and the Service's Representative role will be filled by the Acting Regional Director, Karen Cogswell, until the Regional Director position is filled. The Service's Assistant Regional Director for the Fisheries and Ecological Services Program, Pete Fasbender, will be the Service's Alternate Representative to the Council (attached). Thank you to the Council, committees and its stakeholders for supporting Holly Carroll in her service to the Council over the last year. The Service's staff point of contact to the Council will now be Pete Fasbender.

For further information on the Service's B-Report, please contact Pete Fasbender at peter_fasbender@fws.gov or 612-242-4212 or Aaron Martin, at aaron_e_martin@fws.gov or 907-378-0568.

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