



# United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
1011 East Tudor Road  
Anchorage, Alaska 99503



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Report # B-7: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, October 2024.

## **Yukon River Federal Subsistence Fisheries - Preliminary Post Season Summary**

The Chinook salmon run was among the lowest on record, and none of the established escapement goals for Chinook salmon were met. The summer chum salmon run met the drainage wide escapement goal, allowing for limited harvest using selective gear types such as dip nets and manned fish wheels, with a mandatory live release of all Chinook salmon. Federally qualified subsistence users were the only users allowed to harvest summer chum salmon within Federal public waters of the Yukon River drainage during selective gear openers.

The fall chum salmon run is expected to be below the established escapement goals, and the mainstem Canadian origin fall chum salmon escapement is likely going to be one of the lowest on record. The coho salmon run is well below average, and among the lowest on record. Complete chum and coho salmon closures have been in place for the fall season.

Throughout the salmon seasons, there was opportunity to harvest non-salmon species using non-salmon gear. But even non-salmon gear was limited in some ways during the season to reduce the incidental harvest of the salmon as they migrated through the river.

Subsistence salmon fishing was essentially closed throughout the salmon seasons, marking the fifth consecutive year of chum salmon gillnet closures and the fourth consecutive year of full closures for Chinook salmon. Subsistence harvest estimates will not be available until after household surveys are completed and analyzed by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), typically completed in December. However, Yukon households faced another year of very low harvest. This situation represents a loss of over 190,000 salmon for approximately 2,500 households in the region. We acknowledge the severe hardship these closures impose on subsistence households, affecting their meals, and cultural practices. Although Yukon residents valued the limited selective gear opportunity to harvest a few thousand summer chum salmon and the few hundred salmon donated to communities from the test fishery projects, it does not adequately address the subsistence, cultural, and spiritual needs of the Yukon River communities dependent on salmon.

For more information, please contact Holly Carroll, Yukon River Federal Subsistence Manager, at [holly\\_carroll@fws.gov](mailto:holly_carroll@fws.gov) or 907-786-3687.

## **Kuskokwim River Federal Subsistence Fisheries - Preliminary Post Season Summary**

2024 marks the 11th consecutive year of federal management of the Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon run within Federal public waters. The fisheries management team, composed of the Refuge Manager and staff from Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge and the in-season managers from the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission co-managed the 2024 salmon run in Federal public waters of the Kuskokwim under a Federal temporary special action issued by the Refuge Manager. The Special Action ran from June 1 to August 17 to provide conservation and sustainable fishing opportunities for federally qualified subsistence users for Chinook, chum and coho salmon within Federal public waters.

Salmon escapement numbers are preliminary and are based on the best available source of mainstem passage data provided by ADF&G from the Kuskokwim River sonar project and Bethel Test Fishery. All weirs with escapement goals were inoperable due to high water during peak passage, and the Kwethluk weir was not installed due to high water.

The preliminary end of season estimated passage at the Kuskokwim River sonar was 143,243 (113,034 – 173,612) Chinook Salmon. This is compared to a total river wide run estimate of 134,000 Chinook Salmon in 2023 and 142,700 Chinook Salmon in 2022. The fisheries management team announced three 12-hour drift/set net opportunities targeting Chinook Salmon. The Bethel Test Fishery suggested a poor run, while the estimates from Kuskokwim River sonar (a quantitative evaluation) indicated that our management objective had been achieved.

Chum Salmon numbers for 2024 were higher than the previous four-year averages but still well below historic harvests and returns. The end-of-season estimated passage at the Kuskokwim River sonar was 254,448 Chum Salmon compared to 251,542 in 2023 and 103,864 in 2022.

The Sockeye Salmon numbers for 2024 were smaller than in previous years, but still high enough to allow for some fishing opportunities with set nets. The end of season estimated passage at the Kuskokwim River sonar was 695,065 Sockeye Salmon compared to 899,180 in 2023 and 614,712 in 2022.

The 2024 Coho Salmon season numbers remained lower than the 2012-2023 averages, which included the five lowest runs recorded on the Kuskokwim River. After consultation, the fisheries management team determined that: 1) more than 50% of the 2024 Coho Salmon run had passed through the Bethel Test Fishery site based on normal run timing, 2) previous openings had low fishing effort, and 3) fishing effort would continue to be low as the season progressed. Therefore, federal management was relinquished on August 17, 2024.

For more information, please contact Spencer Rearden, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Manager, at [spencer\\_rearden@fws.gov](mailto:spencer_rearden@fws.gov) or 907-543-1023.

## **Chignik River Drainage and Alaska Peninsula**

The biological escapement goal for Chinook Salmon in the Chignik River drainage has only been achieved in four of the last ten years, with the 2023 weir count being the lowest on record. It was predicted that the 2024 Chinook Salmon escapement goal would not be reached. Therefore, an Emergency Special Action was implemented on June 14<sup>th</sup> closing all Federal public waters in the Chignik River drainage to subsistence fishing for Chinook Salmon, this closure remained in effect throughout the season.

The Federal In-season Manager, pursuant to delegated authority from the Federal Subsistence Board under ANILCA Title VIII, has issued a temporary special action (7-01-Salmon-24) to prohibit the use of gill nets and seines for fishing for salmon in Federal public waters of Trout Creek, Russell Creek, Mortensens Creek, Thinpoint Lake, and Sixmile Lake drainages, effective 12:01 a.m. Monday July 22, 2024 through Tuesday December 31, 2024. Additionally, this action establishes a total bag limit of 50 salmon for Mortensens Creek and a daily bag limit of 10 salmon per day and 20 in possession in Trout Creek, Russell Creek, Thinpoint Lake, and Sixmile Lake drainages for all other legal gear types.

Alaska Peninsula Area Federal subsistence fishing regulations apply to Federal public freshwaters of the Alaska Peninsula within the Izembek, Maritime, and Alaska Peninsula/Becherof National Wildlife Refuges. These regulations allow the use of seines and gillnets for Federal subsistence fish harvest. The use of these gear types in the Federal public freshwaters subject to this action could impact the viability of those salmon populations because the gear types are highly effective in capturing salmon in small freshwater waterways. Limited salmon population information is available in this area warranting action to proactively take a conservative approach and avoid population level impacts.

For more information, please contact Jonathon Gerken, Federal Subsistence Manager, at [jonathon\\_gerken@fws.gov](mailto:jonathon_gerken@fws.gov)

## **Kodiak Island**

Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) issued 38 Federal subsistence fish permits through August 2-24. Ten of the federally qualified subsistence users were new to the Federal subsistence program and four of those new users were from Port Lions. For reference, in 2023 the Refuge issued 20 permits and only four people reported that they harvested fish. Amy Peterson, the Refuge's Community Affairs Liaison, worked with Tribes and villages to inform them of any updated regulations in areas that were now open due to the Federal Subsistence Board rescinding closures in both fresh and marine Federal public waters in the area.

There were concerns from the Kodiak Aleutians Regional Advisory Council regarding the decline of the Sockeye salmon run in the Buskin River, Kodiak, especially since 2020. The Buskin River is the primary subsistence salmon area for many Kodiak residents and was closed to fishing for Sockeye salmon in 2018–2023 due to insufficient escapement and, more recently, due to premature death of salmon before spawning. The Buskin River Sockeye salmon run was strong in 2024 with 9,704 counted at the weir.

For more information, please contact Danielle Fuji-Doe, Acting Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge Manager, at [Danielle\\_Fuji-Doe@fws.gov](mailto:Danielle_Fuji-Doe@fws.gov)

## **Severe Shortages for Federal Subsistence Users**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) recognizes the serious hardship that salmon fishing closures have caused families and communities throughout Alaska. Subsistence fishing closures and restrictions that limit fishing to federally qualified subsistence users are not taken lightly. The loss of salmon harvest is causing food insecurity as well as the loss of important traditional, and cultural practices in multiple regions.

The Federal Subsistence Board (Board), of which the Service has a voting seat, has also acknowledged the frustrations and concerns regarding the poor returns of salmon and other issues impacting salmon such as commercial bycatch of salmon that has occurred when subsistence fisheries were severely restricted and escapement goals and treaty obligations were not met.

The Board's regulatory authority is limited to management of only a part of the salmon's lifecycle, so there are few actions it can take related to the management of commercial marine fisheries and bycatch. However, the Board knows this issue is critically important to the Federal Regional Advisory Councils. The Board spoke to the Secretary of the Interior about bycatch and other salmon issues during her visit to Alaska in October 2023. They shared the Federal Regional Advisory Council's concerns regarding catastrophic declines in salmon and requested the Secretary advocate for ecosystem scale collaborative salmon management to ensure continuation of subsistence, including working with Administration counterparts, engaging in scientific collaboration with the Department of Commerce, and encouraging joint Tribal consultations between the Board and North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

On March 6, 2024, during a joint session at the 2024 All-Council Meeting, ten Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils met and discussed the need for timely and meaningful action related to the bycatch and interception of subsistence resources in commercial fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea. The Board has been supportive of the steps the Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils have taken, such as writing letters to express their concerns to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. The Board elevated letters from nine of the ten Regional Advisory Councils to the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture.

These letters can be found at the following links:

[Seven Council letter to FSB on salmon bycatch and salmon management](#)  
[Kodiak Aleutians Council letter regarding subsistence fisheries](#)  
[Southeast Council letter to FSB regarding new FWS representative on NPFMC](#)

Salmon declines continue to have major impacts on federally qualified subsistence users who depend on salmon as a mainstay of their livelihood, culture, and economy. There are multiple factors impacting salmon in marine and freshwaters and we reiterate the importance of working

together cooperatively among all the governing bodies that manage salmon populations throughout their lifecycle.

### **Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative Update**

The Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative was started in early 2023. From the beginning, it has centered on Tribal input and involvement. The original effort focused on coordination with the Association of Village Council Presidents, Kawerak, and Tanana Chiefs Conference, but with Tribal direction, Gravel to Gravel has invited all 110 Tribes within the initiative to join the restoration and resiliency effort. To date, approximately 40 projects totaling 36 million dollars have been funded in the region through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. These projects will be discussed during our second in-person meeting being held on October 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> in Anchorage. At this event partners will provide updates to these projects, and we hope to finalize a Memorandum of Understanding between Tribes and Federal agencies.

For more information, please contact Boyd Blihovde, Senior Advisor for Conservation, Alaska Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at [boyd\\_blihovde@fws.gov](mailto:boyd_blihovde@fws.gov) or 907-786-3654.

### **Marine Mammals Update**

The walrus team at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted a research cruise in the Chukchi and Bering seas in the summer of 2024. The R/V *Norseman II* departed from Nome, Alaska, on May 31 and returned to Nome on June 19, 2024. Upon departure, the *Norseman II* proceeded northwest with the goal of navigating through the Bering Strait to Cape Lisburne to reach walrus aggregations and avoid conflicts with the subsistence harvest. Based on satellite imagery, it was expected that a passage could be found through areas of low ice concentration. However, due to strong north winds and currents, the ice channel the vessel was navigating closed rapidly on the evening of June 4, trapping the vessel in consolidated pack ice and damaging its rudder. Over the course of 14 days, the *Norseman II* slowly drifted with the ice pack due to the combined effects of winds, currents, and tides. As sea ice melted and loosened around the ship, the vessel was able to reach open water and return to Nome on June 19 for repairs.

The cruise's sampling goals were not fully achieved. However, the science team was able to collect benthos, sediment, and water samples from seven locations to be tested for harmful algal toxins. They also collected water samples from 15 locations to analyze concentrations of chlorophyll, nutrients, and phytoplankton. In addition, the crew tested a 4-camera array system to collect imagery of bottom sediments and epibenthic communities. The camera system proved effective and will be used in the next season's walrus foraging study.

For more information, please contact Paul Schuette with the Walrus and Sea Otter Program, Marine Mammals Management Office, at [paul\\_schuette@fws.gov](mailto:paul_schuette@fws.gov) or 907-786-3810.

## **Office of Subsistence Management Moves to the Office of the Secretary of the Interior**

Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland issued Secretary's Order 3413 which transferred the Office of Subsistence Management (OSM) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to the Office of the Assistant Secretary – Policy, Management and Budget effective July 15, 2024.

The Order followed feedback gathered through nation-to-nation consultation and the enactment of the Department of the Interior's 2024 appropriations in which Congress directed a transfer of OSM to the Office of the Secretary. The move is one of many that the Department is making to strengthen federal subsistence policies and structure and ensure that federally qualified subsistence users and Alaska Native peoples have an opportunity for meaningful engagement in its implementation.

The Office of Subsistence Management provides administrative support to the Federal Subsistence Board and the Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils. OSM's responsibilities and functions will remain the same following the move to the Office of the Secretary.

### **Staffing**

Boyd Blihovde, the Regional Director's Senior Advisor for Conservation will be attending the October Council meeting in person. He will be joined by other staff members including Jill Klein, the Regional Subsistence Coordinator/Interagency Staff Committee member who supports the Service's Regional Director's participation in the Federal Subsistence Board.

We would like to thank the delegated in-season fisheries managers, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Regional Advisory Councils, the Office of Subsistence Management, and our Tribal partners who have contributed to this report and the work of the Service.