

Division of Commercial Fisheries
Sam Rabung, Director

Nome Office
PO Box 1148
Nome, AK 99762-1148



Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Doug Vincent-Lang, Commissioner

PO Box 115526
Juneau, AK 99811-5526
www.adfg.alaska.gov

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CONTACT: Jim Menard or Kevin Clark
Norton Sound Area Manager & Asst. Area Manager
(907) 443-5167 or (800) 560-2271

2022 NORTON SOUND SALMON MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK

INTRODUCTION

Norton Sound is comprised of two fishing districts, Norton Sound District and Port Clarence District (Figure 1). The Norton Sound District extends from Cape Douglas south to Point Romanof and includes over 500 miles of coastline. The area open to commercial salmon fishing is divided into six subdistricts. Each subdistrict contains at least one major spawning stream with commercial fishing effort located in the ocean near stream mouths. The Port Clarence District encompasses all waters from Cape Douglas north to Cape Prince of Wales and its commercial salmon fishing area is adjacent to the communities of Brevig Mission and Teller (Figure 2).

Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G; department) staffing for salmon management within Norton Sound includes three permanent biologists, a program technician and 14 seasonal employees during the summer months. Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) funds numerous adult salmon counting projects and takes part in cooperative projects with ADF&G, tribal, and federal entities. Anticipated department management projects in 2022 include: Kwiniuk River counting tower; Nome River weir; Solomon River weir; periodic aerial surveys of index spawning streams; and catch sampling and monitoring efforts at Nome and Unalakleet. A cooperative project with other agencies is the Unalakleet River weir (Bureau of Land Management and NSEDC) with funding providing by United States Fish and Wildlife Service – Office of Subsistence Management. Department staff will also track the salmon escapement counts reported on NSEDC projects on the following rivers: North, Snake, Niukluk, Shaktoolik, Ungalik, Inglutalik, Eldorado, and Pilgrim.

Only one commercial salmon buyer is expected this year. The department expects commercial fishing openings for pink and coho salmon, but an expected poor run of chum salmon may result in no openings targeting chum salmon.

2022 RUN OUTLOOK

Salmon outlooks and harvest projections for the 2022 salmon season are based on qualitative assessments of parent-year escapements, sibling relationships, subjective determinations of freshwater overwintering and ocean survival, and in the case of the commercial fishery, the projections of local market conditions. The department expects a better coho salmon run in 2022 than last year if there is an average return of four-year-old fish. However, the chum salmon run is again expected to be poor. The Chinook salmon run is expected to be similar to or slightly lower than last year's run. The regular subsistence fishing schedule will start June 15 in the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts and the possibility of a subsistence fishing closure is likely during the last week June if the run is like the last two years when the escapement goal was not reached. No commercial fishing for Chinook salmon is expected and the sale of incidentally caught Chinook salmon in commercial fisheries will not be allowed if subsistence fishing is closed. Chum salmon harvest is forecasted to be 5,000 to 10,000 fish with almost all the harvest expected to be an incidental catch in the pink and coho salmon fishery. The department expects the pink salmon run to be average for an even-numbered year and nowhere near the record runs of the three previous even-numbered year runs. However, even-numbered year runs are almost always much stronger than odd-numbered year runs and the pink salmon harvest could be 250,000 to 1 million fish if there is buyer capacity. The coho

salmon run is expected to be much better than last year, but below average based on ocean survival conditions in recent years and the commercial harvest is expected to be 50,000 to 100,000 fish. In the Port Clarence District, the commercial fishery will remain closed because the in-river goal of 30,000 sockeye salmon at Pilgrim River is not expected to be reached. The department expects a poorer run than last year and subsistence fishing closures in the Pilgrim River may occur after July 4 if the run is projected to not reach the sockeye escapement goal.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Department staff will manage salmon fisheries to ensure escapement goals are achieved. Subsistence fishing may need to be restricted or closed if concerns for escapement arise. Commercial fishing will occur depending on market availability and if there is an adequate surplus above escapement and subsistence needs. Informational updates will be broadcast periodically over Nome public radio stations and Advisory Announcements sent to the Unalakleet radio station for broadcast to inform fishermen of current regulations, catches, escapements, and ADF&G activities. The public may call the Nome office toll-free number at 1-800-560-2271 or the local number of 907-443-5167 or the Unalakleet field office at 907-624-3921 for information.

Because of high snowfall this past winter, river levels are expected to again be higher than normal and delays getting escapement projects operational may occur. In cases where subdistricts do not have escapement projects operational, the department will follow escapements in an adjacent subdistrict. If there is a commercial fishing period, the department will compare the commercial catch with historical catch values during similar time periods to determine if additional fishing time is warranted.

Subsistence salmon permits are required when net fishing in northern Norton Sound (from the Elim Subdistrict to the Port Clarence District) and only Alaska residents qualify for a permit. A sport fish license is required when fishing with a rod and reel in southern Norton Sound. However, in northern Norton Sound rod and reel is a legal subsistence gear but when salmon fishing using rod and reel a sport fish license or subsistence salmon permit is required. Household subsistence permits are free and Alaska residents can get their permits online at www.adfg.alaska.gov/store. Permits will also be issued at the Nome Fish & Game office. Village residents can call 1-800-560-2271 if they are unable to get a permit online and a permit will be mailed.

NOME SUBDISTRICT

The Subdistrict 1 (Nome) salmon run in 2022 is expected to be below average, but commercial fishing targeting pink and coho salmon is expected. From 2010 to 2020, the Nome Subdistrict chum salmon escapement has ranged from 31,000 to 124,000 chum salmon, but because of high water the 2021 chum salmon escapement was unknown. Three rivers have chum salmon escapement goal ranges: Eldorado (4,400 to 14,200), Nome (1,600 to 5,300) and Snake (2,000 to 4,200) and in 2021 only the Eldorado River was known to have reached its escapement goal range with 6,283 chum salmon counted through the weir. Although the Snake River crew only counted for 4 weeks, the projection estimate is that the lower end of the escapement goal range of 2,000 chum salmon may have been reached. The Nome River weir crew was only able to count 16 days during the historical peak passage time and would likely not have reached the lower end of the escapement goal range of 1,600 chum salmon.

In marine waters, subsistence fishing is allowed 7 days a week prior to June 15 and after August 15. Likewise, in fresh waters, subsistence fishing is open 7 days a week prior to June 15 and after August 31. From June 15 through August 15, the marine waters of Nome Subdistrict west of Cape Nome will be open to set gillnet fishing from 6 p.m. Wednesday until 6 p.m. Monday. Marine waters east of Cape Nome will remain open 7 days a week throughout the season. Beginning June 15 through August 31, subsistence set gillnet fishing will be open in fresh waters from 6 p.m. Wednesday until 6 p.m. Monday. The fishing schedule listed above will be in effect unless reduced or closed by emergency order because of weaker than expected salmon runs. Dip nets and cast nets are legal gear for harvesting salmon in Norton Sound and are allowed during the set gillnet fishing periods. Beach seining is allowed during set gillnet fishing periods from June 15 through August 15.

Stream-specific harvest limits are listed on the subsistence salmon fishing permits. There are no catch limits in marine waters. Permit catch limits for the Nome Subdistrict and the Port Clarence District streams are listed in Table 2.

The department will use the Eldorado weir counts as the primary indicator of chum salmon run strength in Nome Subdistrict east of Cape Nome. If chum salmon escapement begins to lag compared to historical run timing curves and indicates the escapement goal range will not be met, marine and river fishing periods may be reduced or suspended until the department switches to management of other salmon species. However, the Eldorado River chum salmon escapement goal is expected to be met in 2022 and daily escapement counts from the weir will be used to confirm that the run is tracking as expected. Aerial surveys will also be used to index escapement to the Bonanza, Flambeau and Sinuk rivers.

The department will use the Nome River and Snake River escapement counts as an indicator of chum salmon run strength in the Nome Subdistrict west of Cape Nome. If the Nome River and Snake River weir counts project that the chum salmon escapement goal range will not be reached, marine and freshwater subsistence fishing periods may be restricted or suspended. The Cripple and Penny Rivers are closed by regulation to subsistence chum salmon fishing. The Sinuk River sockeye salmon escapement goal range (800–1,600 fish) at Glacial Lake is determined by aerial survey.

Commercial fishing periods are expected in Nome Subdistrict for pink salmon if there is buyer interest. Commercial fishing for coho salmon in August is also expected if the run is as strong as forecast. Directed fishing periods for coho salmon will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and for pink salmon to a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches.

GOLOVIN SUBDISTRICT

Commercial fishing is expected for pink and coho salmon, but the chum salmon run may be too weak to allow commercial fishing.

NSEDC plans to operate the Niukluk River counting tower in 2022. The tower project was operational from 1995–2012. Historically, the Niukluk River tower escapement goal and the Kwiniuk River tower escapement goal in the adjacent Elim Subdistrict both were achieved, or both not achieved in the 16 of 18 years when both were operational.

The Niukluk River tower site is much farther upstream than the adjacent Elim Subdistrict counting tower on Kwiniuk River, and the department historically has used the counts from Kwiniuk River tower to determine early season chum salmon openings in Golovin Subdistrict. Further commercial chum salmon fishing opportunity after mid-July will depend on chum salmon escapement. The department will also evaluate catch per unit of effort (CPUE), if there is commercial fishing, with historical commercial fishing periods during similar dates to determine if additional fishing time is warranted.

Pink salmon commercial fishing periods are expected to occur in July if there is buyer interest and coho salmon commercial fishing periods are expected beginning in late July. Until mid-August, coho commercial CPUE will be used to set commercial coho salmon fishing time. After mid-August, the department plans to survey the Niukluk River and Ophir Creek to determine if the aerial survey goal of 750–1,600 coho salmon will likely be reached. Directed fishing periods for chum and coho salmon will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and for pink salmon to a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches.

ELIM SUBDISTRICT

Except for 2014, when hook and line subsistence fishing for Chinook salmon was closed, there have been no other subsistence restrictions in over 30 years in Subdistrict 3 (Elim). Subsistence permits are required when subsistence salmon fishing in the Elim Subdistrict and no subsistence restrictions are expected.

Commercial fishing for pink salmon is expected if there is buyer interest in pink salmon directed fishing periods.

Commercial coho salmon openings are likely beginning the end of July and the run strength is expected to be below average. Directed fishing periods for coho salmon will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and if a pink salmon directed fishing period occurs maximum mesh size will be restricted at 4 ½ inches.

NORTON BAY SUBDISTRICT

In the last decade, there were record commercial harvests of pink (2012), chum (2013) and coho (2015) salmon in Subdistrict 4 (Norton Bay) but the second half of the last decade had very poor salmon harvests. Commercial salmon fishing harvests are expected to be below average in 2022 based on recent runs.

Since 2011, NSEDC has operated a counting tower on the Inglutalik River and the department plans to use salmon escapement counts from the project as an index to compare with other projects in 2022. NSEDC also plans to have a counting tower on Ungalik River for the fourth consecutive year.

No restrictions on subsistence fishing are expected this year.

SHAKTOOLIK AND UNALAKLEET SUBDISTRICTS

Subdistricts 5 (Shaktoolik) and 6 (Unalakleet) have been managed as one fishery because past studies have shown salmon bound for these subdistricts intermingle and that harvests in one subdistrict likely will affect the other. No commercial fishing is expected for Chinook or chum salmon, but pink salmon will be targeted commercially depending on buyer interest and gillnet fishing would likely occur beginning in July.

Abundance of the Chinook salmon run will be monitored using passage estimates from the Unalakleet River weir and a counting tower on the North River, an important Chinook salmon spawning tributary in the Unalakleet River drainage. The escapement goal range for the North River is 1,200–2,600 Chinook salmon. However, for a Chinook salmon directed commercial fishery to occur, the department must project an escapement of a minimum of 1,900 Chinook salmon past the North River tower.

To protect Chinook salmon, the subsistence fishing schedule in regulation will begin on June 15 in Subdistricts 5 and 6. The subsistence fishing schedule in the marine waters of the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts is from 6:00 p.m. Monday until 6:00 p.m. Wednesday and from 6:00 p.m. Thursday until 6:00 p.m. Saturday. The schedule in the Unalakleet River is from 8:00 a.m. Monday until 8:00 p.m. Tuesday and from 8:00 a.m. Friday until 8:00 p.m. Saturday. If the Chinook salmon run is like the last two years, then the escapement goal range would not be expected to be met and the department would close subsistence fishing the last week of June, have shortened fishing openings in July, and gillnet restrictions to 6 inches or smaller mesh size until Chinook salmon escapement improves. Beach seining would be allowed beginning in July with the requirement that all Chinook salmon be immediately released alive to the water.

Based on the recent 5-year trend in run performance and sibling relationships, the 2022 Chinook salmon run to southern Norton Sound is expected to be like 2021. If that occurs, there will likely be subsistence fishing closures because the 2021 run was nearly 30% below the low end of escapement goal range. Subsistence regulations allow beach seines with a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches to be used from July 1 through August 10 to harvest salmon other than Chinook salmon seven days a week.

Coho salmon commercial fishing is expected beginning in late July or early August and the run is expected to be below average to average. Department management for coho salmon season is considered to begin on July 25, or when coho salmon catches exceed chum salmon catches. Coho gear will be restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches. The first period will likely be 24 hours in length and if there are no escapement or buyer capacity concerns, then regular 48-hour fishing periods will follow.

ST. MICHAEL AND STEBBINS

Subsistence fishing is open 7 days per week in southern Norton Sound from Pt. Romanof to Black Point. Regulation does allow for the restriction of gillnet mesh size in the subsistence fisheries throughout Norton Sound if it is necessary to conserve Chinook salmon.

PORT CLARENCE DISTRICT

The sockeye salmon run is not expected to reach the inriver goal of 30,000 fish in Pilgrim River and, therefore, a commercial fishery targeting sockeye salmon is not expected.

Subsistence salmon fishing permits are required for the Port Clarence District, Pilgrim River drainage, and Salmon Lake. Salmon Lake will only be opened by emergency order and permits are only available at the Fish and Game office in Nome. Catch limits are listed on subsistence permits and in Table 2.

The department expects the sockeye salmon run in 2022 to be lower than the 2021 run. The department will compare the 2022 sockeye salmon run with historical escapement counts at the Pilgrim River weir after July 4 and decide if a closure is necessary to reach the escapement goal range. If the sockeye salmon run comes in much better than expected, then the department would look to increase the subsistence sockeye salmon catch limit. The Pilgrim River escapement goal range is 6,800–36,000 sockeye salmon through the weir. No other subsistence fishing closures are expected in Port Clarence District.

Table 1.—Commercial catch by salmon species, Norton Sound District, 1961–2021.

Year	Chinook	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
1961	5,300	35	13,807	34,327	48,332	101,801
1962	7,286	18	9,156	33,187	182,784	232,431
1963	6,613	71	16,765	55,625	154,789	233,863
1964	2,018	126	98	13,567	148,862	164,671
1965	1,449	30	2,030	220	36,795	40,524
1966	1,553	14	5,755	12,778	80,245	100,345
1967	1,804	0	2,379	28,879	41,756	74,818
1968	1,045	0	6,885	71,179	45,300	124,409
1969	2,392	0	6,836	86,949	82,795	178,972
1970	1,853	0	4,423	64,908	107,034	178,218
1971	2,593	0	3,127	4,895	131,362	141,977
1972	2,938	0	454	45,182	100,920	149,494
1973	1,918	0	9,282	46,499	119,098	176,797
1974	2,951	0	2,092	148,519	162,267	315,829
1975	2,393	2	4,593	32,388	212,485	251,861
1976	2,243	11	6,934	87,916	95,956	193,060
1977	4,500	5	3,690	48,675	200,455	257,325
1978	9,819	12	7,335	325,503	189,279	531,948
1979	10,706	57	31,438	167,411	140,789	350,401
1980	6,311	40	29,842	227,352	180,792	444,337
1981	7,929	56	31,562	232,479	169,708	441,734
1982	5,892	10	91,690	230,281	183,335	511,208
1983	10,308	27	49,735	76,913	319,437	456,420
1984	8,455	6	67,875	119,381	146,442	342,159
1985	19,491	166	21,968	3,647	134,928	180,200
1986	6,395	233	35,600	41,260	146,912	230,400
1987	7,080	207	24,279	2,260	102,457	136,283
1988	4,096	1,252	37,214	74,604	107,966	225,132
1989	5,707	265	44,091	123	42,625	92,811
1990	8,895	434	56,712	501	65,123	131,665
1991	6,068	203	63,647	0	86,871	156,789
1992	4,541	296	105,418	6,284	83,394	199,933
1993	8,972	279	43,283	157,574	53,562	263,670
1994	5,285	80	102,140	982,389	18,290	1,108,184
1995	8,860	128	47,862	81,644	42,898	181,392
1996	4,984	1	68,206	487,441	10,609	571,241
1997	12,573	161	32,284	20	34,103	79,141
1998	7,429	7	29,623	588,013	16,324	641,396
1999	2,508	0	12,662	0	7,881	23,051
2000	752	14	44,409	166,548	6,150	217,873
2001	213	44	19,492	0	11,100	30,849
2002	5	1	1,759	0	600	2,365
2003	12	21	17,060	0	3,560	20,653
2004 ^a	22	47	42,016	0	6,296	48,381
2005	151	12	85,523	0	3,983	89,669
2006	20	3	130,808	0	10,042	140,873
2007	19	2	126,136	3,769	22,431	152,357
2008	83	60	120,309	75,525	25,124	221,101
2009 ^a	84	126	87,041	17,364	34,122	138,737
2010	140	103	62,079	31,557	117,743	211,622
2011	185	369	58,917	7,141	110,555	177,167
2012 ^a	197	134	37,056	205,498	62,772	305,657
2013 ^a	151	247	53,802	8,338	118,709	181,247

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2014	289	519	112,756	182,406	107,745	403,715
2015	1,288	4,199	153,929	62,888	147,497	369,801
2016	321	2,888	102,890	208,961	51,176	366,236
2017	538	2,975	191,254	20,321	163,473	378,561
2018	906	3,623	260,707	40,449	238,029	543,714
2019	1,390	7,013	139,837	76,408	157,938	382,586
2020	986	2,062	14,689	7,919	26,379	52,035
2021	15	473	7,149	289,912	6,410	303,999
Average 2016-2020	828	3,712	141,875	70,812	127,399	344,626
Average 2011-2020	625	2,403	112,584	82,033	118,427	316,072

Note: Harvest numbers may include a small number of salmon retained for personal use reported on fish tickets that were not commercially sold.

^a Chinook salmon caught were not sold but were retained for personal use.

Table 2.–Norton Sound and Port Clarence Districts annual subsistence salmon permit limits.

Norton Sound District - Nome Subdistrict

Cripple River	No chum harvest allowed
Penny River	No chum harvest allowed
Nome River	100 coho/household
Snake River	100 coho/household
Solomon River	40 chum/household and 20 coho/household

Port Clarence District

Pilgrim River	3 kings/household and 25 sockeye/household
Salmon Lake	Open by emergency order only; 200 sockeye salmon/household

Note: The waters of the Nome Subdistrict are subject to closures from June 15 to September 30. The Port Clarence District is outside the Nome Subdistrict area and, therefore, subsistence fishing can occur 7 days a week unless closed by an emergency order.

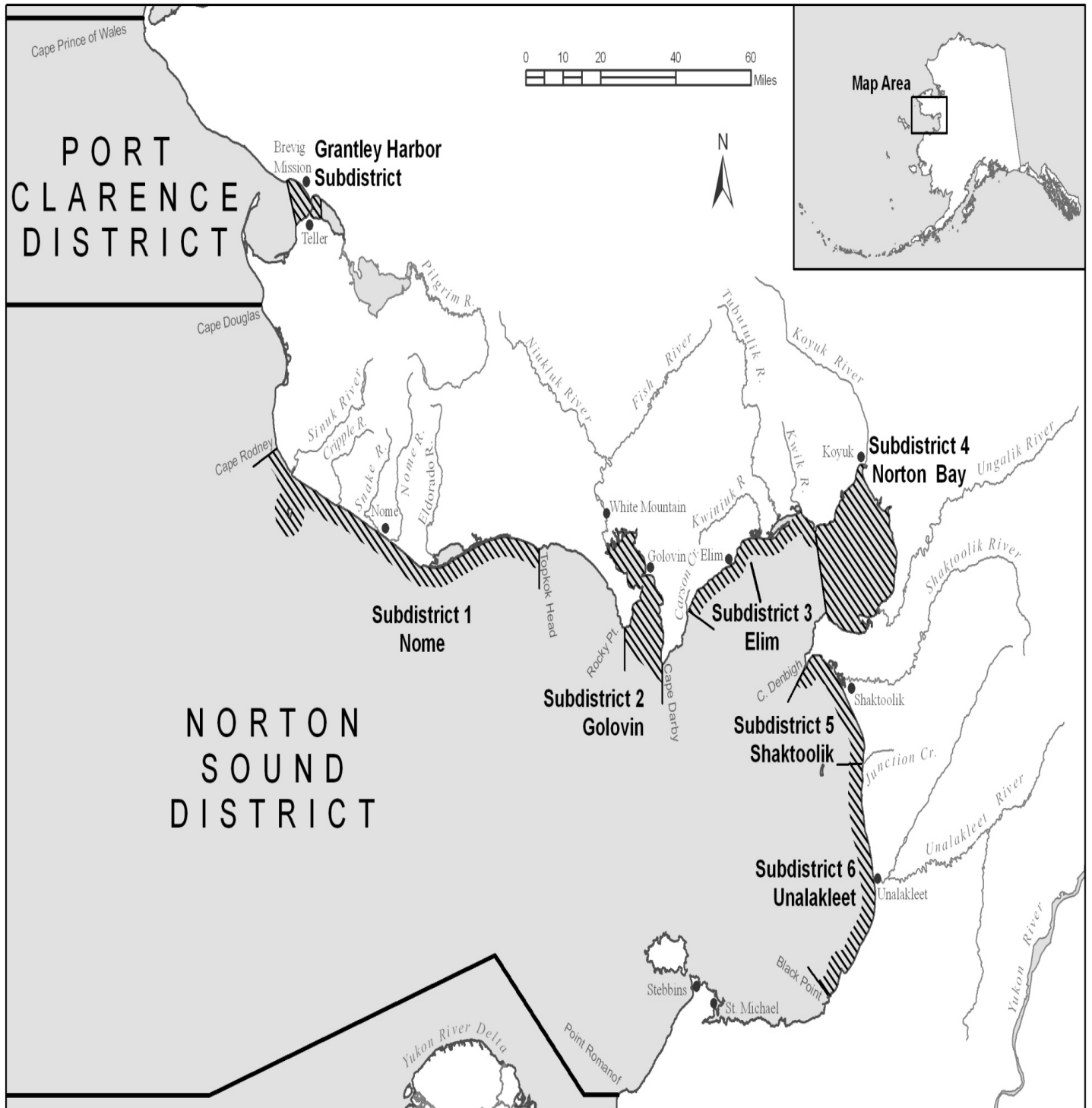


Figure 1.—Norton Sound District and Port Clarence District.

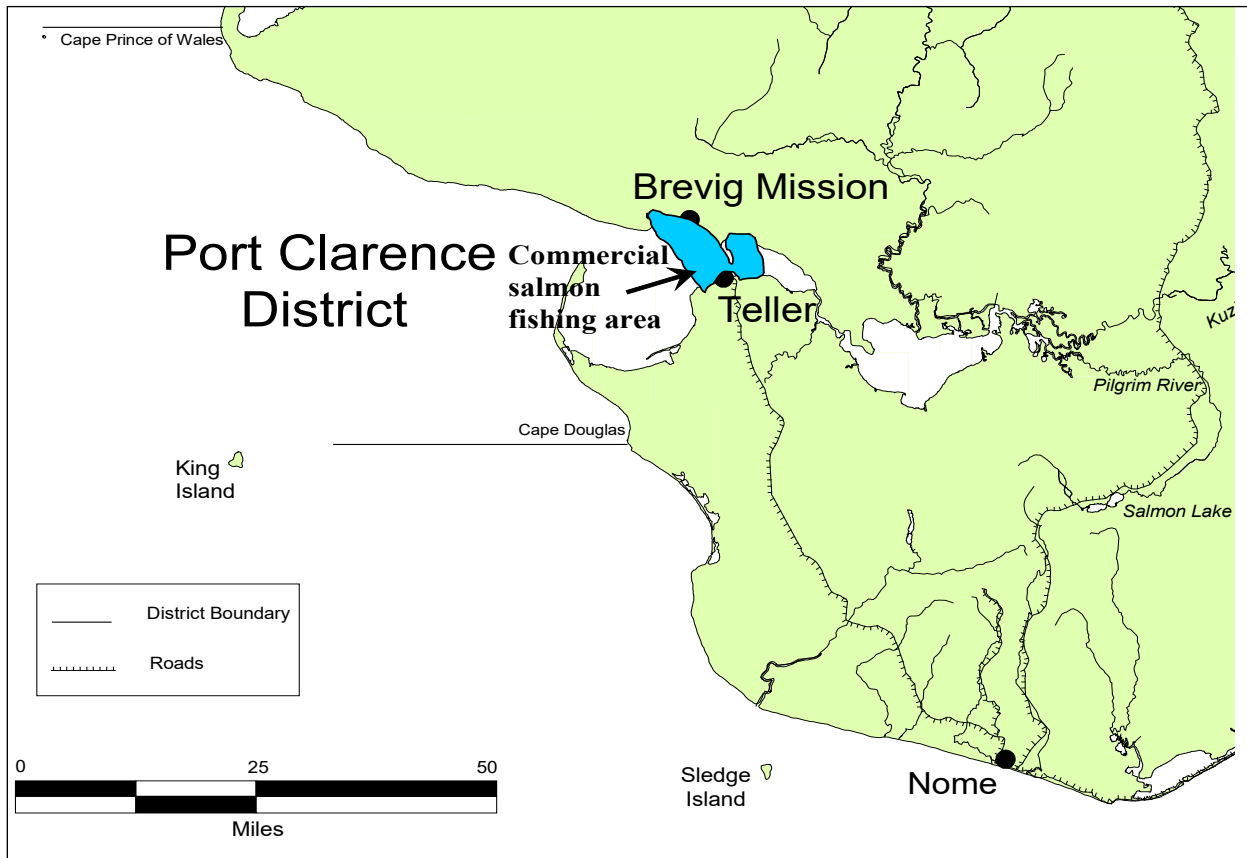


Figure 2.—Port Clarence District commercial salmon fishing area.