

# **Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group**

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## **Meeting Summary**

**May 30, 2012**

Called to order at 10:00 am at ADFG in Bethel and adjourned at 1:15 pm. Eight of thirteen members were present and a quorum was established.

### **AGENDA ITEMS:**

- 1.) Continuing Business
- 2.) Old Business
- 3.) New Business

### **WORKING GROUP ACTION ITEMS:**

- 1.) Update phone directory at ADF&G. Specific requests were made by the KRSMWG to tell how to "reach a real person" early in the menu options.
- 2.) Distribute the USFWS letters discussed at the May 30, 2012, meeting.
- 3.) Set up a talk show on KYUK radio.
- 4.) Casie Stockdale and Eva Patton will send an email out to the KRSMWG Distribution list soliciting conservation ideas.

### **MEETING ACTION ANNOUNCEMENT:**

The next KRSMWG meeting will be at 10:00 am on Wednesday, June 6, at ADF&G in Bethel.

### **ADF&G RECOMMENDATIONS:**

No recommendation at this time.

### **WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:**

- 1.) Motion to schedule a meeting on June 6, 2012, in order to give ADF&G and USFWS more time to discuss management tools and to agree on a recommendation. Motion passed unanimously.
- 2.) Motion to approve Dave Cannon's Chinook conservation poster for distribution (see information packet). The KRSMWG's name may be added to the poster. Motion passed unanimously.

### **PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:**

- 1.) Carl Berger announced that slush ice bags will be available to commercial fishermen. Fishermen can call (907) 543-5967 to get on a waitlist.
- 2.) Casie Stockdale (AVCP) announced that Becca Robertson with the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) offered to train KRSMWG members on how to give testimony to the Board of Fish. The best time for a training session would be in the fall of 2012 or spring of 2013. If interested call Casie at 907-545-4872.

### **CONTINUING BUSINESS:**

### **LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORTS:**

Greg Roczicka reported that the smelt run in the lower river seemed stronger than last year. People have been setting up fish camps and are not fishing for salmon yet.

#### ONC IN-SEASON SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Eva Patton (ONC) reported that Alissa Joseph and Iyana Dull will be doing inseason subsistence surveys again this year. ONC will be working closely with the KRSMWG for ASL sampling of the subsistence Chinook harvest and Chinook conservation outreach.

#### MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

The middle river reported much debris. People were waiting for smelt and not salmon fishing yet.

#### KNA INSEASON SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

KNA will be conducting inseason surveys again this year from Kalskag to the headwaters.

#### UPPER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Evelyn Thomas (Upriver Subsistence) reported much debris and no fishing yet.

#### HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Dan Esai (Headwaters Subsistence) said that his dad went to catch Sheefish to make Indian ice cream for the youth conference in Nicolai.

#### DISCUSSION OF RUN ASSESSMENT DATA:

Kevin Schaberg (ADF&G) discussed 2012 projects and run assessment:

##### **1.) Overview of 2012 projects:**

- Takotna, Kogrukuk, Tatlawiksuk, George, and Telaquana River weirs will be operational again this year.
- Tuluksak and Kwethluk River weirs will be operated by USFWS again this year. The Kwethluk River weir is currently up and running.
- Aniak sonar will not be operational this year. The Aniak Sonar project was discontinued in deference to the operation of the Salmon River weir, which was previously operated as part of a radio telemetry project. ADF&G will seek funding to extend the Salmon River weir project into Coho season and to make it a long-term project.

##### **2.) Review of run assessment information presented at the March 2012 Interagency and KRSMWG meeting.** *Please refer to page 1 of the May 30 information packet.*

##### **3.) New information since March, 2012:** *Please refer to page 2 of the May 30 information packet.*

- Chinook salmon forecasts were revised from those presented at the Kuskokwim Fisheries Interagency Meeting. Updated estimates shifted the Chinook forecast slightly smaller from numbers previously discussed.
- ADF&G, citing time as a limiting factor, chose information other than Spawner Recruit (S/R) based Kuskokwim management objective for 2012. This was because there was not enough time to evaluate S/R from the newly revised run reconstruction.

**4.) ADF&G proposed using the Kogrukluk (KOG) River weir as a 2012 tool.** *Please refer to pages 2-4 of the May 30 information packet.*

- The Kogrukluk River weir has a long and dependable dataset, showing several cycles of abundance.
- Indices from BTF show a strong relationship with escapements observed at the individual weirs.
- Data from the weirs show a strong relationship with one another.
- Therefore, it is possible to identify a threshold of escapement, from here on referred to as a *management objective*, at the Kogrukluk River weir that should also equate to escapement goals being met at other monitored systems.
- By using the BTF/KOG relationship as a basis for projecting escapement at Kogrukluk, we can assess the likelihood of whether the management objective at Kogrukluk River may be reached based on catches to date in the BTF.

**5.) ADF&G Recommendation 1:** *Please refer to page 5 of the May 30 information packet.*

- More fish are forecasted to come back than recommended for escapement.
- Start the 2012 season without initial Mainstem restrictions (just the pre-existing tributary restrictions)
- To manage by tracking BTF daily and using the KOG SEG range and relationships
- To use these numbers for the Kuskokwim River:
  - 195,000=forecasted Midpoint of Chinook return
  - 87,000=Management Objective for Chinook
  - 108,000=Chinook available for subsistence harvest
    - Above recent annual subsistence harvests

**6.) USFWS Alternative Recommendation:** *Please refer to page 6 of the May 30 information packet.*

- Achieving KOG's SEG will not assure meeting other tributary escapement goals
- Start the 2012 season with initial Mainstem restrictions
- To evaluate BTF daily and lift restrictions if run abundance allows
- To use these numbers for the Kuskokwim River :
  - 195,000= forecasted Midpoint of Chinook return
  - 133,000= Management Objective for Chinook
  - 62,000=Chinook available for subsistence harvest
    - Below recent annual subsistence harvests

**7.) ADF&G Recommendation Compromise:** *Please refer to page 7 of the May 30 information packet.*

- Except for KOG, many weir escapement goals may be higher than necessary because of limited data.
- To start the 2012 season without initial Mainstem restrictions (just the pre-existing tributary restrictions)
- Evaluate BTF daily and take action when necessary
- To use these numbers for Kuskokwim River:

- 195,000= forecasted Midpoint of Chinook return
- 120,000= Management Objective for Chinook
- 75,000= Chinook available for subsistence harvest
  - Close to recent amount of annual subsistence harvest
  - Enough fish to achieve both subsistence needs and escapement , but barely

POINTS OF CLARIFICATION (in response to questions during the presentation):

- Fish start showing up at the KogrukluK at the end of June. BTF will be evaluated on a daily basis beginning June 2, 2012.
- ADF&G is trying to relate the KogrukluK River weir's escapement to the whole river, not individual tributaries
- ADF&G's Management Objective (M.O.) is defined as the threshold of escapement below which additional harvest restrictions occur.
  - ADF&G is not managing to achieve only the lower bound of the M.O. because the lower bound is the trigger point for further restriction.
  - ADF&G's mentality is to provide fishing opportunity until there is indication that the lower bound of the M.O. will not be met.
- If restrictions are deemed necessary, they would be river-wide and in the form of rolling closures.
  - Closures would begin at the mouth and each defined section of the Kuskokwim River would be closed for seven days.
  - Closures would reach upriver last, so these communities would have the most notice (at least two weeks).

COMMENTS:

Regarding the Salmon River weir:

- Greg Roczicka was concerned about consistency of data, since Aniak Sonar operated for many years. Jon Linderman (ADF&G) explained that the weir will assess all salmon species in the Aniak River, whereas the sonar only gave an index of chum salmon. Linderman said that ADF&G "will continue to move forward to continue to use the [Salmon River Weir] project as the basis for a more detailed assessment of all salmon species in the Aniak drainage, which has been conspicuously absent for a very long time."
- Dan Gillikin (USFWS) asked if ADF&G was going to try to do a retrospective analysis of sonar data to apportion salmon species. Kevin Schaberg replied that the Department would investigate doing such analysis, but since the weir will not be operating at the same time as the sonar project it may be difficult.

Regarding the ADF&G and USFWS Recommendations:

- Beverly Hoffman reiterated the importance of KRSMWG members' input being heard during management decisions. She reminded the agencies that the members are out in

the communities explaining these management actions to people. As representatives of their communities, members have valuable input.

- Gene Peltola, Jr., (USFWS) reassured the KRSWMG that both agencies were “working together the best we are able to” and that they were still discussing management strategies. He said that USFWS did the best they could to review the model that was introduced to them by ADF&G two weeks prior. USFWS felt that using the 133,000 M.O. (a higher figure than ADF&G used) would make them more confident in meeting tributary goals within established Refuge boundaries. He said, “This is the second year of using a modeled inseason management approach, which we continue to improve upon. The bottom line is that if you look at the Kwethluk and Tuluksak, we are going on several years of not meeting established escapement goals. So, we felt that we can accept the model if we use these figures (133,000 Mainstem/9,389 KOG).”
- Greg Roczicka asked, since fish headed for lower river tributaries come later in the run, why would USFWS make restrictions at the beginning of the season? Gene Peltola, Jr., replied that USFWS was addressing both the issues of tributary escapement and subsistence use, not only on the lower river but in the middle and upriver, as well. “The consequence is that we have further restriction besides the existing tributary restrictions...to provide for more subsistence use for middle and upriver. If the run comes in strong, we can lift restrictions.”
- Mike Thalhauser (KNA) asked if both agencies would be satisfied to start the season off only having restrictions on the lower Kuskokwim, because upriver restrictions would not help lower river tributaries. Chris Shelden (ADF&G) responded that the existing pre-season tributary restrictions already address Mike’s concern. Bev Hoffman added that at the March 2012 meeting the agencies worked with the village of Kwethluk to open a portion of Kuskokuak Slough to allow for subsistence fishing above the mouth of the Kwethluk River.
- Stuart Currie (Processor member) wanted clarification on the point of disagreement between the agencies’ two SEG numbers. He also asked if the concern for tributaries within the Refuge would cause “over-escapement” and a possible population crash in other areas. Gene Peltola replied that USFWS only looks at the tributaries within the conservation unit. Kevin Schaberg (ADF&G) stated, “This year we are not expecting a population that would be able to achieve [“over-escapement”] even if there is no level of harvest.” Kevin clarified that exceeding the lower bound of any escapement goal will not be detrimental to a population.
- Dan Gillikin (USFWS) gave some more context for the USFWS recommendation: “In addition to the Kwethluk and Tuluksak not meeting escapement goals, the George has not met escapement three out of the last four years. The Tatlawiksuk has not met the twenty-fifth percentile of historically observed escapement for four out of four years, and the Takotna has not met the twenty-fifth percentile of historically observed escapement for the last three years.” The midpoint of the river’s run assessment has been below 155,000 Chinook for the last four years. Dan “just wanted to make people aware that this, in our opinion, is not just concern for tributaries with conservation

concerns that we have management responsibilities towards; but a basin-wide trend that is of concern.”

- Tom Doolittle (USFWS) commented, “From our perspective, this is another projected poor run. We are looking at potentially the fifth year of not meeting escapement on the Kwethluk River; and the sixth year on the Tuluksak. Especially on a fully functioning river like the Kwethluk in our conservation unit, with so many successive years [of not meeting escapement] and not last year despite restrictions, we are very concerned about this particular river system and the sister rivers near it like the Kisaralik and Kasigluk.”
- Casie Stockdale expressed concern regarding management objectives. Kevin replied, “Again we do not aim to achieve these lower numbers. These lower bounds of escapement goals are a management indicator. If we are not achieving these we need to take further action.” Casie Stockdale replied, “Given the imprecision of the inseason tools, it makes sense to go with a more conservative number toward the mid-range, and use that for management action.”
- Greg Roczicka was concerned that early closures might artificially inflate BTF numbers. He did not agree with “upfront” closures without seeing what fish are coming back first, and asked how run estimates could be compared to previous years without the regular amount of harvest downriver from the BTF site. Kevin Schaberg explained that BTF indexes numbers of fish at the BTF site. Harvest below BTF would be reflected in the BTF number. (Kevin later reminded the group that the majority of the harvest on the river is at BTF or below).

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**After a mid-meeting caucus, ADF&G and USFWS could not agree on a management recommendation. Both agencies requested a KRSWMG meeting June 6 to allow time for further assessment.**

Travis Elison (Acting Kuskokwim Area Manager, ADF&G) stated, “Based off [the KRSWMG’s] concern and all of the confusion last year, diverging management inseason is not beneficial to anyone....We feel that we need to exhaust all time and all avenues to come to agreement with USFWS.”

Gene Peltola, Jr., (Refuge Manager, USFWS) reiterated that both agencies have been working on a short timeline and have been trying to get information out to the public as quickly as possible. He stated that “he agrees with the Department with everything but one thing, and we have been making progress for the last three or four days towards coming to an agreement on that one thing. We wouldn’t ask for another meeting next week unless we felt that we could come to an agreement.”

### **COMMENTS:**

Bev Hoffman replied that she really appreciated Travis’s statement because the KRSMWG was just getting this information (including the USFWS’s letters) that day. She appreciated everyone’s effort and use of another week to come to a good decision.

Tom Doolittle (USFWS) commented, "For the last two years, the great thing is that, despite some of the turmoil that we all have experienced, we actually have information to probably do the best management for the future that we have ever have. Of course, it creates a lot more discussion than we have had in the Working Group's history. I think this is very important. The dialogue that we are having with the State right now has only come up in the last two weeks ...and we haven't had the time to digest all of this information yet. We have been working very cooperatively since then to come up with the best answer to some of the legal mandates that the refuge has and the requirements that Fish and Game has."

### **PROCESSOR REPORT:**

Stuart Currie with Kuskokwim Seafoods in Bethel reported "not a very bright picture" for commercial fishing and Kuskokwim Seafoods in 2012. Stuart made it clear that he was proud that our Alaska salmon resource is managed sustainably and he was honored to be working with the KRSMWG. However, he was concerned that if Kuskokwim Seafoods does not have a good chum season beginning July 1, 2012, as well as a good coho season, operations may not be able to continue until the fishery rebounds. Stuart described factors currently affecting the fish market prices, as well as the effect of a poor 2011 commercial season:

- Norway is having a difficult time selling farmed fish to China, so Norwegian prices are down in order to interest other customers.
- Salmon prices are 20-25% lower than 2011.
- Four years ago Chile had a die-off. In 2012, Chile expects to rebound from 300,000 metric tons of salmon to 600,000 metric tons.
- When Alaska was the sole provider of salmon the world the state produced about 400,000 metric tons. Now the world consumes about 2.2 metric tons (five times as much), which drives prices down.
- Kuskokwim Seafoods missed quite a few commercial fishing opportunities in 2011 due to a late season start on July 5, an early season end date, and subsistence fishing restrictions due to conservation concerns.
- Kuskokwim Seafoods was unprofitable again in 2011 for the second year in a row. The impact on fishermen was a \$24,000 loss during chum season and a \$130,000 loss during coho season.

Nick Souza with Coastal Village Seafoods (CVS) agreed with Stuart that the Alaska fishery is well managed. He is preparing for the season and will be ready to buy fish.

### **COMMENTS:**

Bruce Lindsay commented that last year it was a good idea for processors to refuse to buy Chinook. He hopes that processors do the same this year.

### **SPORT FISH REPORT:**

John Chythlook (ADF&G Sport Fish) reported that closures will be the same for taking Chinook in the Kwethluk, Kasigluk, Kisaralik, and Tuluksak Rivers. This year the George and Aniak Rivers will also be closed to subsistence fishing.

- *Regulations based on April 12 Emergency Order:* From June 1 through July 25, closures on subsistence fishing on the above tributaries also constitute closures on Sport Fishing

for Chinook and Subsistence fishing for Chinook with rod and reel. Subsistence fishing must be with gillnets with 4-inch or smaller mesh and not longer than 60 feet.

Chythlook reported that guides have been vocal, but understanding, about the sport fishing closures. Guides say that they practice catch and release only, but other fishers may not. Another observation by was an increased number of Alaska residents coming to the Kuskokwim to fish.

#### COMMENTS:

Lamont Albertson (Sport Fish member) asked how Chinook will be handled when caught. Chythlook replied that Chinook may not be removed from the water and must be released immediately.

John Chythlook stated that he hopes for more enforcement in closed areas this year. However, Lamont brought to his attention that the state does not plan on filling the State Trooper position in Aniak until fall of 2012. Chythlook said that he can request the Bethel Trooper to patrol the area, but it would be helpful for the KRSMWG to make a request for this service. Gene Peltola commented that if enforcement has a high enough priority, then he could use USFWS resources to do it.

#### WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

**MOTION 1:** Motion to have a meeting on June 6, 2012, in order to give ADF&G and USFWS more time to discuss management tools and to agree on a recommendation. Motion passed unanimously (7 yeas, 0 nays.) *Note that James Charles had to leave at 12:00 pm, which left seven members voting).*

**MOTION 2:** 2.) Motion to approve Dave Cannon's Chinook conservation poster for distribution (see information packet). The KRSMWG's name may be added to the poster. Motion passed unanimously (7 yeas, 0 nays).

#### COMMENTS FOR MOTION 2:

Evelyn Thomas reported that people were hanging signs in Crooked Creek about George River closures.

Bev Hoffman commented that there needs to be public outreach similar to last year, such as a call-in radio show with ADF&G, USFWS, and a KRSMWG member. She suggested getting conservation posters out immediately.

Casie Stockdale wanted to continue the discussion about outreach ideas. She agreed that the radio was a great way to get the word out. She encouraged upriver residents to describe how they see the results of sacrifices that people made downriver because "it is a great thing for as many people to hear as possible." Casie also wondered if Bob Heron or Senator Lyman Hoffman would like to contribute conservation messages like they did at the AVCP State of Our Salmon Conference this past winter. Casie would like ADF&G to quantify the amount of Chinook that should be saved, in order to give people a more concrete idea of how they can make a difference.

Eva Patton suggested that the KRSMWG start getting a general conservation message out immediately, starting with posters at the Bethel boat dock. During her surveys, she has found that the input from upriver fishers remains very important. She hopes that this positive reinforcement of downriver conservation efforts continues this year. Eva also reminded the group of the importance of giving downriver communities positive reinforcement if fish reach their spawning grounds. Eva agreed that telling people actual numbers of fish to save would be effective.

#### **OLD BUSINESS:**

Old business items tabled until the next meeting.

#### **NEW BUSINESS:**

1.) KNA and ONC will begin distributing Chinook conservation posters.

#### **GENERAL COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:**

Comments regarding restricting subsistence fishing to federally qualified users:

- Greg Roczicka was concerned that no one knew how many Chinook leave the Bethel airport in coolers and fish boxes because fish leaving in June could be Chinook. He still was in favor of restricting subsistence fishing on the Kuskokwim to federally qualified users.
- USFWS explained that since there is no information regarding how many fish are being sent out of the Kuskokwim, an assessment can't be made. Some of these fish could be sent out by federally qualified users, so restricting the fishery by a federal action may not make a difference.
- Bev Hoffman added that it would be very easy to have someone count coolers and fish boxes at Alaska Airlines and Era. However, she did not support making a federal restriction this season.

Evelyn Thomas may have a potential Upper River Subsistence Alternate. The potential member wants to listen to the next meeting before she decides to become involved.

Lamont Albertson pointed out that the ADF&G phone answering system is not set up to accommodate calls regarding salmon concerns. Chris Sheldon (ADF&G) replied that staff had just returned for the season, and they would work on the phone system immediately. Travis Elison added that ADF&G was investigating having a toll-free number created for the Bethel office.

Fritz Charles (Member at Large), a Bethel resident, followed up by saying that the only way that he could ever talk to a real person was to drive to the office. He strongly suggested that ADF&G hire a live operator to answer the phone and direct calls. A live operator would be a better use of funding than a toll-free number because most people have free long distance on their cell phones.

Kevin Schaberg commented that ADF&G has been working with the Board of Fish to establish an escapement goal for the whole Kuskokwim River. He is currently developing materials about different concepts and KRSMWG members are welcome to call his office number (907-543-2456) if they have questions or concerns.

Fritz Charles has a talk show on KYUK radio at 10:00 am on Mondays and he offered to mention Chinook conservation.

Daniel Esai asked if the Subsistence Salmon Harvest Calendars were mailed yet. Chris Shelden replied that they went out a few weeks ago. If someone did not receive a calendar, they can call ADF&G and have one mailed to them immediately.

If anyone wanted to donate frozen Coho, Bev Hoffman offered to arrange shipment to Daniel Esai for the Youth Conference in Nicolai.

**WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:**

<b>MEMBER SEAT:</b>	<b>NAME:</b>
UPRIVER ELDER	<i>vacant</i>
DOWNRIVER ELDER	James Charles
COMMERCIAL FISHER	<i>absent</i>
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Greg Roczicka
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSTENCE	Gerald Simeon
UPPER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Evelyn Thomas
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	Daniel Esai
PROCESSOR	Stuart Currie (Kuskokwim Seafoods)
MEMBER AT LARGE	Fritz Charles
SPORT FISHER	Lamont Albertson
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	<i>absent</i>
Y-K DELTA RAC	<i>absent</i>
ADF&G	Travis Elison
CHAIR	Greg Roczicka

<b>Other Participants:</b>	
ADF&G Comm. Fish : Jon Linderman, Dan Bergstrom, Zach Liller, Brittany Blain, Chris Shelden, Steven Hall, Kevin Schaberg, Alice Bailey, Janet Bavilla, Jan Conitz, Travis Elison	
Sport Fish : John Chythlook	
Subsistence Division: Alissa Joseph, Hiroku Ikuta, Jeff Park	
USFWS: Dan Gillikin, Steve Miller, Gene Peltola, Jr., Tom Doolittle, Deanna Williams	
OSM: Don Rivard	
Nick Souza (Processor member) Beverly Hoffman (Sport Fish member, co-chair) Mike Thalhauser (KNA) La Donn Roberts (KNA) Maridon Boario- Senator Hoffman’s office Dave Cannon-Napaimute Native Village Mack McClain- Ottertail Eva Patton, ONC	Angela Denning Barnes- KYUK radio Bruce Lindsay Patrick Carofso Carl Berger, Iyana Dall, ONC Steve Walsh, Kuskokwim Seafoods Casie Stockdale, AVCP Tim Andrew, AVCP

**GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS:**

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (**ADF&G**), Orutsarmiut Native Council (**ONC**), Kuskokwim Native Association (**KNA**), Association of Village Council Presidents (**AVCP**), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (**USFWS**), Bethel Test Fishery project (**BTF**), Catch Per Unit Effort (**CPUE**), Coastal Village Seafoods (**CVS**), ADF&G Commercial Fisheries Division (**CF**), ADF&G Sport Fisheries Division (**SF**), Regional

Advisory Council (**RAC**), Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (**KRSMWG** or **Working Group, WG**), Sustainable Escapement Goal (**SEG**), Biological Escapement Goal (**BEG**).