

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

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Meeting Summary

June 8, 2012

Called to order at 1:01 pm at ADFG in Bethel and adjourned at 4:00 pm. Nine 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.) A call-in radio show on KYUK was scheduled for Monday, June 11, with Travis Elison, Robert Sundown, and Fritz Charles.

MEETING ACTION ANNOUNCEMENT:

The next KRSMWG meeting will be June 15, 2012.

ADF&G RECOMMENDATIONS: To initiate 7-day rolling closures effective 12:01 am, Sunday, June 10 until 11:59 pm, Saturday, June 16, beginning in Rolling Closure Section 1 (the Lower Section of Subdistrict 1-B). During this time subsistence Chinook salmon fishing with hook and line gear will be closed, and subsistence fishing will be restricted to the use of gillnets with 4-inch or less mesh not exceeding 60-feet in length.

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

- 1.) To add Mark Leary in Napaimute as an alternate Upriver Subsistence member. Motion passed unanimously.
- 2.) To support ADF&G's recommendation to initiate 7-day rolling closures beginning June 10 in Rolling Closure Section 1 (the Lower Section of Subdistrict 1-B). Motion passed unanimously.

PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:

- 1.) Nick A. Carter disagreed with the 4-inch mesh restrictions currently implemented on Kuskokwim tributaries with Chinook conservation concerns. He thought that we were "harassing the same resource that we want to protect."
- 2.) Myron Nanning (AVCP President) listed his concerns:
 - He did not see why ADF&G was "under pressure to have 'jacks' be counted as part of the escapement for King salmon." He believed that 6-inch mesh restrictions would at least allow people to target chum and "jacks" (young male Chinook) "to help put food on the table."
 - Myron objected to what he perceived as ADF&G and USFWS implementing subsistence restrictions "even before the first King salmon is caught on the river system."

- He expressed the opinion that ADF&G should be monitoring the number of Chinook shipped out of the Bethel by non-local users, but specified that he did not believe users with family ties to the area needed to be surveyed. Along with non-local users, Myron cited Bethel restaurant owners as a concern.
- Myron was concerned about Chinook bycatch in Bering Sea groundfish fisheries.

CONTINUING BUSINESS:

LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORTS:

James Charles (Downriver Elder) relayed that two people he knew had caught only one Chinook each. Henry Lupie (Member at Large) knew of one person who caught one Chinook and one chum, and he mentioned that many subsistence users were working during the week and planned to fish during the upcoming weekend. Charlie Brown (Commercial Fisher) talked to a fisherman who caught two small Chinook.

Mike Williams (Lower River Subsistence) reported “extremely” high water and that people were waiting for more eddies to start fishing. A few people caught two or three Chinook with set sets, along with sheefish and whitefish. He commented that the high water “was good for the fish” to get by, but that he hoped to fish before bad weather arrived.

ONC IN-SEASON LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Please see June 8 Information Packet for ONC's full report.

Iyana Dull (ONC) reported that surveys from that week represented one day of active surveying since the June 6 KRSMWG meeting. Of 13 families surveyed, six families were fishing. Four families used set nets and two used drift nets. Two families used mesh larger than 6-inch and only one family caught Chinook salmon. All the families surveyed reported poor catches and a late Chinook run.

Eva Patton (ONC) announced that Henry Kohl, Jr., joined the ONC survey crew this season. She also encouraged members to help hang conservation posters.

MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Gerald Simeon (Middle River Subsistence) reported cold and rainy weather. He did not think that anyone was fishing yet.

KNA INSEASON MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

KNA contacted families interested in participating in the inseason survey program and will begin surveying next week.

UPPER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Mark Leary (Upriver Subsistence) reported that he made two drifts to check for early Chinook, but he caught nothing. Water was very high.

HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE REPORT: N/A

Ray Collins (Western Interior RAC) did not think any nets were in the water yet.

DISCUSSION OF RUN ASSESSMENT DATA:

1.) Kevin Schaberg gave a presentation about the 2012 Bethel Test Fish (BTF) tool. *Please refer to the June 8 Information Packet.*

Important points from Kevin's presentation:

- BTF to project weir escapements:
 - BTF provides an index of run abundance while Chinook are passing Bethel, whereas weirs are useful later in the season
 - BTF acts as a good predictor for Kwethluk ($R^2=.94$) and Kogrukuk ($R^2=.82$) River weirs Chinook salmon escapements. BTF shows a strong relationship with all the weir escapement observations combined ($R^2=.94$).
 - We have identified an objective number of fish that must be observed at the Kogrukuk River weir that should also equate to achievement of goals at all projects, not just Kogrukuk. The BTF relationship will be used to project whether it appears that we are likely to achieve that objective and thus achieve the established goals.
- Cumulative CPUE comparisons:
 - Years 2008-2011 of BTF Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) will make the best comparisons with 2012 CPUE. In 2008, it was necessary to make a gear change in BTF because the old type of net twine used was no longer available for purchase. The relationship between BTF and weir escapements remained an affective predictor, but years prior to 2008 became more difficult to compare with more recent CPUE. To eliminate uncertainty, only 2008-2011 will be compared to 2012 to assess the likelihood of achieving the objective, but earlier years will be used to model run timing.
- Run timing and projections:
 - Run timing becomes more certain as the season progresses.
 - By examining BTF with different run timings (Early, Average, or Late) we can take a greater range of possibilities into account and narrow the projection of run strength.
- Affect of harvest on the BTF tool:
 - Changes in harvest below BTF do affect the BTF CPUE number, but BTF estimates escapement with the same confidence.
 - Changes in harvest above BTF do not affect the BTF CPUE number. However, the BTF CPUE: Kogrukuk Escapement relationship does assume some harvest above the BTF. If harvest above BTF is higher than indicated at the BTF site, then escapement will be less than indicated, and if harvest above is less than in prior years, escapement may be greater than expected. Subsistence reports both above and below Bethel remain very important to gain perspective on escapement projections.

2.) Kevin Schaberg explained that the current Chinook cumulative CPUE indicated a poor run. He showed how the CPUE was tracking well below the Management Objective in the Early Run Timing and Average Run Timing models. The Late Run Timing model could not give a projection yet because of the low amount of data as of June 8.

COMMENTS:

Henry Kohl, Sr., asked how the “old tool” would have shown the current Chinook run. Kevin Schaberg replied that the BTF tool used in previous years would have also projected a poor run. He clarified that using the same methods to look back and estimate historical escapements to this date (hind casting):

- ADF&G looks at how the cumulative BTF CPUE number relates to recent years (2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011) on a regular basis.
- Looking back, only four years of the last 27 years (since 1984) had shown a CPUE [by this date] as low as the current Chinook BTF CPUE (*see June 8 Information Packet, Chinook Cumulative CPUE table*). Out of those four years, only one year met the current Management Objective.

Bev Hoffman asked if this year’s unusually cold winter and spring could be causing late Chinook run timing. She also asked if the slow snow melt and resulting cold, high water could be a factor. Much discussion followed:

- Travis Elison replied that cold years usually have later run timing.
- Water temperature and water clarity is recorded daily by the BTF crew.
- Water levels are recorded daily at Crooked Creek, but the gauge is currently not operational. Regarding the effect of water levels on run abundance, Kevin Schaberg has found no correlation.
- Doug Molyneaux mentioned that, based on sea surface temperatures, the Yukon River was forecasted to have late run timing this year. Jan Conitz added that wind is also incorporated into these sea surface studies. Bev commented that similar research should be done for the Kuskokwim.
- James Charles commented that air and water temperature near the mouth of the Kuskokwim was still much cooler than Bethel. Shore ice was still floating near Kipnuk and herring were still running in Kuskokwim Bay.
- Robert Sundown (USFWS) asked how late runs typically materialize. Kevin Schaberg replied that all years, except one, with run timing as late as 2012 have been lower than the Management Objective.

Mark Leary asked if BTF adjusted their drifts according to water levels, such as drifting against shore in high water.

- Iyana Dull (former BTF crewmember) explained that BTF has three stations. The level of the water, no matter how high or low, does not affect the way BTF conducts their fishing.
- Doug Molyneaux added, “Bethel test fish does not try to mimic how commercial or subsistence fishermen would fish. Those people trying to put food on the table or to make money are going to try to seek those fish out however best they can. BTF is being operated in an area of the river where the fish are passing through, not milling. The concept is that the test fishery is operated very consistently: if abundance of fish is high, they will catch more fish. If abundance is low, they will catch less fish. That way it gives us an indication of abundance, and the tool is working.”

PROCESSOR: Nothing to report.

SPORT FISH: Nothing to report.

WEIRS/SONAR/MARK-RECAPTURE/AERIAL SURVEYS: N/A

WEATHER FORECAST: Cloudy and scattered rain showers for the next five days, and highs of 50 degrees.

- Doug Molyneaux asked the Chair if weather conditions on the Lower Kuskokwim were reasonable for drying fish. Bev Hoffman responded that conditions were not ideal, and that windy and sunny weather was preferable. She then commented that in wet weather spoilage can be prevented if people stay at camp instead to take care of their fish, instead of commuting.

RECOMMENDATION: ADF&G recommended initiating 7-day rolling closures effective 12:01 am, Sunday, June 10 until 11:59 pm, Saturday, June 16, in Rolling Closure Section 1 (the Lower Section of Subdistrict 1-B). During this time subsistence Chinook salmon fishing with hook and line gear would be closed, and subsistence fishing would be restricted to the use of gillnets with 4-inch or less mesh not exceeding 60-feet in length.

- Closures would begin in Rolling Closure Section 1 and be implemented on a predefined schedule in each subsequent section (2-5).
- Rolling Closure Sections have been described in the June 8 informational packet currently available at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareakuskokwim.salmon#/management>.
- Scheduled closures have subsequently been described in Kuskokwim Area ADF&G News Releases 3 (July 8), 4 (July 11), 5 (July 14), and 10 (July 27).
- News releases announcing dates for the remaining Kuskokwim Rolling Closure sections will be issued. Subsistence restrictions in Rolling Closure Section 2 would be implemented from 12:01 am, Wednesday, June 13, until 11:59 pm Tuesday, June 19.
- The 2012 Chinook salmon Management Objective was agreed upon by ADF&G, the Federal Inseason Manager, and supported by the KRSMWG on June 6, 2012.
- ADF&G cited the current BTF catch per unit effort which indicated that insufficient numbers of Chinook salmon were returning to the Kuskokwim River to both satisfy the Management Objective for Chinook salmon escapement, and to provide a sufficient harvestable surplus to sustain subsistence catch at the levels typically seen in the area.

Travis Elison clarified the recommendation in response to questions:

- The closure length of seven days was based on estimates of Chinook salmon travel time in the lower river. Observations have suggested that it should take about six days for Chinook to traverse each section; the seventh day protects fish swimming between sections.
- At this point of the Chinook run, Chinook salmon outnumber other salmon species in this section of the river. Therefore, mesh size restrictions [6-inch mesh] would not serve a conservation need. 6-inch mesh has been shown to harvest Chinook salmon more efficiently than larger or smaller mesh gear. When sockeye and chum abundance

increases, nets of this size will harvest all three species, limiting the Chinook harvest by increasing chum and sockeye harvest. Therefore, gear restrictions may work to conserve Chinook later in the season.

- The Department has the authority to rescind or extend the closures based on BTF abundance.
- Eek River would be included in the closures. If any waters are excluded, details will be announced in corresponding news releases.

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

MOTION 1: To add Mark Leary in Napaimute as an alternate Upriver Subsistence member. Motion passed unanimously (8 yeas, 0 nays).

COMMENTS FOR MOTION 1:

Evelyn Thomas (Upriver Subsistence primary member) supported appointing Mark Leary as her alternate. Motion passes unanimously (9 yeas, 0 nays).

MOTION 2: To support ADF&G's recommendation to initiate 7-day rolling closures beginning June 10 in Rolling Closure Section 1 (the Lower Section of Subdistrict 1-B). Motion passed unanimously (9 yeas, 0 nays)

COMMENTS FOR MOTION 2:

Mike Williams was concerned that "24 hour, 7 day a week combat fishing" would occur before the closures, like what happened in the Bethel area in 2011. He encouraged people to take only what they needed.

Beverly Hoffman, who was born and raised in Bethel, said that some people know how to conserve and others do not. Regardless, she reminded the group that last year we did not meet escapement goals. "The numbers right now show that we all need to be very concerned."

Members discussed the 7-day length of potential Rolling Closures.

- James Charles commented that people downriver had already anticipated closures. People do not like closures, and would prefer 3-day or 4-day closures instead of 7-days.
- Henry Lupie stated that people in Tuntutuliak want shorter closures.
- Mike Williams stated that since we have established that BTF is credible, we need to make it very clear that management actions can be rescinded if Chinook abundance improves. This clarification would help prevent people thinking that the closure was too long.
- Mike did like discussions between upriver/downriver, and state versus federal agencies: "We are all in it together. I suggest we get into this as painlessly as possible for people to survive; that is what we have done in the past. People are very afraid of the 7 days, and are concerned about the numbers and the existence of the king [salmon] for the future."
- Charlie Brown supported a 7-day closure, not longer.

Two members of the public stated that people would likely disobey fishing restrictions in order to feed their families:

- Lillian Liabon from Akiak said, "I can understand the fish passing through for the future...But, we had a hard winter, and nobody is catching fish....They drift two and three times, and [catch] nothing." She was especially concerned about elders who were out of last year's dried fish, and she explained that the first catch is given to elders, family, or ladies with many children. She continued, "You watch me and this will be true: "We will somehow subsist somehow to eat.....I am very concerned that my people will be criminalized."
- A Kwethluk resident commented that his people did not want to endure closure after closure like last year, so they will not follow the restrictions. "They understand that we need to conserve king salmon," but they think that in 2011 "upriver got all the fish they wanted, and down here we did not." He was concerned about gas prices because Kwethluk residents had to travel more to fish. Bev Hoffman reminded him that at the interagency meeting ADF&G compromised, per John A. Andrew's request, and opened a portion of Kuskokuak Slough near the village for that very reason.

Other members asked that everyone abide by whatever decision is made:

- Bev Hoffman stated, "I don't want to end up like so many parts of Alaska, like so many parts of the world that have no kings anymore. There are many reasons why we are in the situation we are in...The Working Group, as represented by tribal members....all up and down the river, people like you, like me, who have lived here all their life, are trying to make the right decisions....Some years we have had really good years...and some years the people have starved because the fish did not come back, for whatever reason. But, if we don't do *something*, if we don't do *something*, we will be left with nothing. Yes it's true; there are sacrifices that are being made. Last year we put up chum and silvers, those were in abundance. It's not true that people upriver took all they wanted. We all made sacrifices."
- Ray Collins, who recently attended fisheries discussions in Galena, commented that communities on the Yukon River have "been hurting much longer than we have." Some people believe that the Yukon River should be closed entirely because Chinook have not been reaching escapement. Regarding the Kuskokwim, Ray reminded the KRSMWG:
 - "Until we get fish on the spawning grounds, every year is going to get harder and harder, until there is nothing left."
 - Most of the harvest on the Kuskokwim occurs on the lower river, whereas the need for fish upriver is less because of the lower population. Even though lower river communities had "more of a hardship last year" from subsistence restrictions, very few upriver smokehouses were filled. Headwaters communities did not see improvement and they "have not for years."
 - He was optimistic about 2011 reports of upriver communities seeing large Chinook for the first time in years. "If we get the spawning we need, maybe we are on the right track. If we keep getting behind, we will face a total closure."

Fritz Charles commented, "Everybody has a sore part right now, as of this moment, up and down the Kuskokwim: the federally recognized tribes, the federal government, state government, tribal government, whoever it is, and even me. Keep in mind that like everyone has been saying, that [restrictions are] for everyone's benefit. I myself do not support the motion, but I have to live with it. We all do. And like the late Iyana Gusty used to say, 'We have to work together, no matter who we are.' It's a hardship on everybody, but I want my grandchild's grandchild to be able to fish 40 years from now."

Mark Leary reminisced, "I was also thinking of when I first started subsistence fishing, rowing a little wood boat. When my dad caught the first king salmon he would let it go. He would look at me and say, 'Don't worry, there is more coming.' It is sad; now we can't say that."

OLD BUSINESS:

Old business items tabled until the next meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:

Another call-in radio show on KYUK was scheduled for Monday, June 11, with Travis Elison, Robert Sundown, and Fritz Charles.

GENERAL COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:

Doug Molyneaux gave an update from the Lower Yukon. He contacted a few dozen fishermen and subsistence reports were the same as the Kuskokwim. The Yukon Chinook run also seemed very late and fishing was poor. The Emmonak Test Fishery caught no salmon as of June 8.

Myron Nanning asked why ADF&G did not survey non-local subsistence users during the summer months. Kevin Schaberg replied that ADF&G relies on KRSWMG meetings for inseason information and that the agency has always been open for more input.

Henry Lupie was concerned about Chinook bycatch in the ocean: "There needs to be a federal sacrifice for spawning areas and for high seas fisheries. We all understand that the fish come up the river to spawn and then go to the high seas. Once they are out there, there are predators and bycatch. Fewer salmon are coming back to the river. That is what people of the Kuskokwim River are concerned about."

Bev Hoffman stated that "Nothing is easy when it comes to the state of our king salmon."

Ray Collins stated, "I am really proud of the Working Group. I think we just made a very tough decision for all of us; but the fact was it was unanimous. That makes me very proud, that we were willing to demonstrate working together and looking to the future to try to do what we can."

WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:

MEMBER SEAT:	NAME:
UPRIVER ELDER	<i>Vacant</i>
DOWNRIVER ELDER	James Charles
COMMERCIAL FISHER	Charlie Brown
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSTENCE	Gerald Simeon
UPPER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mark Leary
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	<i>Absent</i>
PROCESSOR	Stuart Currie
MEMBER AT LARGE	Henry Lupie
SPORT FISHER	Beverly Hoffman

WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Ray Collins
Y-K DELTA RAC	<i>Absent</i>
ADF&G	Travis Elison
CHAIR	Beverly Hoffman

Other Participants:	
ADF&G Comm. Fish: Kevin Schaberg, Travis Elison, Chris Shelden, Jennifer Yuhas, Jan Conitz, Alice Bailey, Chuck Brazil, Zach Liller, Kalskag fish wheel crew, Brittany Blain	
Sport Fish: John Chythlook, Tom Taube	
Subsistence Division: Hiroku Ikuta, Jeff Park	
USFWS: Deanna Williams, Robert Sundown, Tom Doolittle, Steve Miller, Dan Gillikin, Gene Peltola, Jr., Larry Byrd	
OSM: Don Rivard, Ken Harper	
Stuart Currie (Kuskokwim Seafoods)	Fritz Charles (alternate member)
Diane Hoffman	Angela Denning Barnes (KYUK)
Jeff Sanders	Myron Nanning (AVCP)
Robert Lee Cander	Casie Stockdale (AVCP)
Gary Watson	Gerry Sumpter (Senator Murkowski's)
Tim Andrew (AVCP)	Meyer Hutchinson (Senator Hoffman's)
Iyana Dull (ONC)	Mike Thalhauser (KNA)
Henry Kohl, Jr. (ONC)	La Donn Robbins (KNA)
Henry Kohl, Sr. (ONC)	Mark Leary (Napaimute)
Doug Molyneaux	Eva Patton (ONC)
Dave Cannon	Nick A. Carter

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS:

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (**ADF&G**), Orutsararmiut 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**), Sustainable Escapement Goal (**SEG**), Biological Escapement Goal (**BEG**), Management Objective (**MO**), Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence (**ANS**), Emergency Order (**EO**)