

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

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Meeting Summary

June 26, 2012

Called to order at 10:00 am at ADFG in Bethel and adjourned at 1:30 pm. Seven of thirteen (8 with ADF&G) members were present and a quorum was established.

AGENDA ITEMS:

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

WORKING GROUP ACTION ITEMS: N/A

MEETING ACTION ANNOUNCEMENT:

The next KRSMWG meeting will be at the Call of the Chairs.

ADF&G RECOMMENDATION:

ADF&G did not have a recommendation at this time.

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

- 1.) To approve the agenda. Motion passes unanimously.
- 2.) Recommendation to extend subsistence fishing openings 3 additional days to 6-inch or smaller mesh gillnets in Rolling Closures Section 2. Motion failed.
- 3.) To extend subsistence fishing opportunity with 6-inch or smaller mesh gillnets in Rolling Closures Section 2 an additional 3 days. The duration of rolling closures in Sections 3, 4, and 5 would be reduced from 12 days to 10 days. Motion passed unanimously.

PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:

- 1.) John Wallace, a subsistence fisherman in Bethel, voiced his concerns:
 - First, he addressed what he perceived as the function of the KRMSWG. He was very disappointed to hear that last week ADF&G and USFWS took a mid-meeting caucus to discuss the recommendation behind closed doors. John stated, "I think that everything needs to be out in the open, whether it's positive or negative."
 - John was worried that illegal fishing was going to escalate if subsistence users "did not have a seat at the table." He explained that in tough times, if people feel that they do not have a voice, they leave the group in control and do what they want. He reiterated that the scientific community "needs to keep everyone at the table;" stating that when decisions are made beyond the reach of the group, it alienates the group and degrades the process.
 - John agreed to the original 7-day rolling closures because he planned on fishing immediately afterward to take advantage of the rest of the good drying weather: "It was really tough to buy into that seven days...I was very vocal against it, but I bought into it"

just like the rest of us did region-wide.” He had not supported the five day extension because he was very concerned about the rain spoiling drying fish.

- From John’s perspective, the 6-inch mesh was more wasteful than beneficial. During the three day openers he saw fishermen sinking their nets because they hadn’t anticipated how quickly they would fill up with chum and sockeye. John believed that 8-inch mesh “has a function to limit your take,” as opposed to “catching everything in the river.”

2.) Alan Joseph from Bethel was “very encouraged by the number of salmon coming in.” The day before, his co-workers had fished after work and caught over 200 fish in one drift. Many other fishermen caught over 100 salmon in one drift, and those using shorter drifts (less than 10 minutes) were easily catching around 30 salmon/drift. He reported that the catch ratio was about 10 Chinook per 100 salmon. Alan agreed with others that the 7-day closures should not have been extended, but thanked the KRSWMG for all of their hard work this season.

3.) Phillip Peter from Akiachak thanked ADF&G for the opening to 6-inch mesh on Monday. His first drift he caught 15 “good-sized” Chinook and his second short drift he caught 16. He has been a subsistence fisherman his entire life, and commented that mesh sized from 5 5/8-inches or 5 3/4-inches up to 6-inches “were alright.” Peter also said that this year’s high water was “good water” because “there were all kinds of fish in the river” that even whitefish nets could catch.

4.) Edward Nicholai from Atmautluak commented that his brother in Toksook Bay was surprised that he could still catch Chinook. Usually Chinook only stay in that area for first two weeks but it had been four. Edward requested that the Spring Interagency Meeting be held in Bethel instead of Anchorage so that more people from the area could attend.

5.) Leonard Wassilie from Akiachak was happy for the three day opening. He warned the group that people cited by law enforcement “will be tougher in the future.” Leonard also disagreed with commercial fishing in Quinhagak.

- Travis Elison (ADF&G) clarified:
 - The first commercial fishing period in District 4 (Quinhagak) would be June 27: “this is the latest that we have initiate a commercial opener since 1980, and probably back to the 1960’s.” It is 12 days later than ADF&G is mandated to commence commercial fishing in that district. This late beginning was justified because of the late Chinook run timing.
 - Travis met with fishermen and visited with women cutting fish in Quinhagak before deciding on the commercial period. He reported that fish racks were full and “there was no concern about meeting subsistence harvest needs there.”
 - Furthermore, District 4 (Quinhagak) is managed separately from District 1 (Kuskokwim River) because it is a separate stock of salmon. Managers would make decisions on future commercial openers based on what happens on 27 June.

6.) Aggie Gregory commented that she had been using a set net and was catching fish, which she was happy about. Even though she was grateful for the subsistence openers, she was concerned about the rain spoiling her fish even though she checks it every day.

7.) Winchow Tikner from the village of Nikolai called for clarification of rolling closures in Section 5. Travis Elison took his email address to send him the schedule.

8.) Alan Simeon in Aniak is the grandson of Sam Simeon and remains the primary fisher for Gerald Simeon's family. He spoke with Alice Bailey and requested that his comments be brought to the meeting:

- He stressed the importance of announcing changes to fishing regulations over the VHF radio or KYUK radio because that is the only available communication at fish camp.
- From what he had observed, he believed that the Chinook would be late. For many years he has flown over the Alaska Range and has seen that the "magic trigger" for the Chinook to start running is when the snow melts up there. It takes about nine days for the runoff to reach the mouth of the river. His guess is that Chinook will be running by the end of June.
- This year the water will be below average because the earth absorbed much of the snowmelt, which means that it will leach out and be very cold.
- Chinook are like caribou and geese; they change their migration pattern in the river according to conditions. They won't always swim in the same place.
- Fish can be preserved in bad weather: "We have no control of the weather but we DO have control of the smokehouse." He also reminded people that tradition is to preserve things, not take all that you can.
- Finally, he said "We have to be on the positive side of things...We have to all stick together, not one village against another."

9.) Casie Stockdale (AVCP) gave catch reports from subsistence fishermen in Bethel during recent rolling openings:

- During the Section 1 opening, one fishermen made two trips and a total of 8 drifts, and caught 6 Chinook, 10 sockeye, and 42 chum salmon. The same fishermen fished the morning of the opening in Section 2, and caught 3 Chinook, 7 sockeye, and 39 chum salmon in three drifts.
- A second fisherman fished just below Bethel and caught 5 male Chinook, 28 sockeye, and 122 chum salmon in a single 30 minute drift.
- A third fisherman fished below Bethel and caught 4 male Chinook, 21 sockeye, and between 15 and 30 chums in one 30 minute drift and one 45 minute drift.
- A fourth fisherman made two short drifts and caught 2 male Chinook, 9 sockeye, and 47 chum.

10.) Boris Epchook, Mayor of Kwethluk, made comments in reference to management by ADF&G and USFWS. His main concern was Chinook caught incidentally in ocean fisheries, but Bev assured him that this issue will continue to be addressed in post-season meetings.

11.) Douglas Kernak from Tuntutuliak gave a report from the lower river. He said that the water was murkier since the last KRSMWG meeting so catches were improving. For instance, he used chum gear and caught 50 fish in a few drifts. One person caught 71 fish in a 15 minute drift, 10 of which were Chinook. In general, people were catching more chum than Chinook and he reported that the sockeye run appeared to be trickling in.

CONTINUING BUSINESS:

LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORTS:

Fritz Charles (Member at Large) reported that as soon as Section 1 opened to subsistence fishing, with 6-inch mesh nets at 12:01 am on June 22, he was there fishing along with 40 other boats. His total round-trip from Bethel took six hours, but he was happy to report that he caught 10 Chinook, 25 chums, and 26 sockeye. Many other fishermen had good catches, as well.

Mike Williams (Lower River Subsistence) reported that fishing in Akiachak had been “very good” since the 6-inch mesh opening:

- In two fifteen-minute drifts below Akiak, he caught a total of 50 Chinook, 100 sockeye, and 30 chum and his fish racks were now full. Average catches were 100 fish a day, 30 to 50 of which were Chinook.
- Mike also said that his community held a meeting to discuss harvests with 6-inch mesh. Some fishermen reported 6-inch mesh as “back breaking” because in addition to Chinook, it harvests many sockeye and chum. He told them to take only what they need and to pull the net immediately if it starts sinking.
- Elders suggested “not stressing the river with short openers” because they felt capable of conserving Chinook as they have done for thousands of years.

ONC INSEASON LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

ONC did not send technicians to visit fish camps during subsistence fishing closures so there was not a report for this survey week.

MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Gerald Simeon (Middle River Subsistence) thanked Alice Bailey (ADF&G) for the Information Packets. His section was still closed. Average catches with 4-inch nets had shown one Chinook for every 10 chum salmon.

Carl Morgan (Middle River Subsistence alternate) echoed Gerald Simeon’s comments. He said that many people pulled their net as soon as they saw signs of fish, in order to avoid catching too many chums and sockeye. He was grateful for catching 8 Chinook, 6 chum, and 1 sockeye before the closure.

KNA INSEASON MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Please see June 26 Information Packet for KNA’s full report.

Mike Thalhauser also reported average catches with 4-inch nets had been one Chinook for every 10 chums and sockeye salmon.

He clarified that comments on the KNA report depicted sentiments heard on the river. He suggested that we keep trying to get the word out about conserving Chinook salmon.

UPPER RIVER SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Evelyn Thomas (Upriver Subsistence) reported that Crooked Creek caught about 10 Chinook, 20 chum, and 15 sockeye before Section 4 closed. She said that everyone was confused about when the 6-inch opening was scheduled to occur so they were waiting to fish.

- Travis Elison (ADF&G) clarified that Section 4 will open on July 4

Mark Leary (Upriver Subsistence alternate) gave this report:

- Salmon were jumping in Napaimute. Before the rolling closure, he reported that the best fishing was at night. Nick Kameroff, Jr., caught 15 Chinook overnight with a set net, and Mark caught 24 Chinook, 44 chum, and one sockeye. The best day of fishing was June 22 when 32 Chinook were caught.
- Mark was very surprised to catch a 50-pound female Chinook, and sad afterwards when he "realized that he could have let her go."
- The water was dropping as much as one foot per day and his net was getting closer to the bottom of the river. Mark wondered if the run was late or if the fish were passing under nets because of the high water.
- Mark believed that managers were doing the best they could this season. However, after the closures he expected to see even more Chinook in Napaimute.

HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE REPORT:

Dan Esai (Headwaters Subsistence) caught 2 Chinook at his Blackwater camp, which is 50 miles upstream from McGrath. He commented that the fish were in excellent shape and had high oil content. His father said that the run was late because of heavy snow coming downriver from the headwaters, creating very cold water temperature.

DISCUSSION OF RUN ASSESSMENT DATA:

Kevin Schaberg (ADF&G) stated that water clarity at the Bethel Test Fish site was average and water clarity was increasingly murky and below average.

The 2012 Chinook salmon cumulative CPUE index was below 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011 and this year's run timing is later than all years except 1985. Based on the Late Run Timing projection model, Kevin estimated that 25% to 50% of Chinook had passed Bethel.

Regarding the Chinook salmon Management Objective, Kevin explained that since we were so early in the run there was still much uncertainty. However, "There is potential for meeting our Management Objective based on this figure." He pointed out that cumulative indices for Chinook salmon had been climbing for the last week.

Gene Peltola (USFWS Refuge Manager) left the room prior to Kevin's presentation. The Chair paused the meeting. When he returned, the chair addressed him: "I feel that it is very important that you be a part of this if you are here in Bethel."

The sockeye salmon cumulative CPUE indices indicated that the run was late but abundance was increasing. The numbers also could reflect the level of subsistence harvest below and at Bethel.

The Chum salmon cumulative CPUE indices indicated average run timing and increasing abundance. In comparison to other years, chum abundance was well ahead.

WEIRS/SONAR/MARK-RECAPTURE/AERIAL SURVEYS:

Kevin Schaberg reported that the Tatlawiksuk River weir has counted 1 Chinook and 15 chum. He clarified that Kalskag Fish Wheel counts cannot be compared to other years because the position of wheels changes depending on the species targeted. USFWS reported that the Kwethluk River weir crew was waiting for water to come down. The Tuluksak River weir would be fish tight by the end of the day.

SPORT FISH REPORT:

Tom Taube (ADF&G) reported that Chinook sport fishing was closed in the Kuskokwim River drainage for the remainder of the season.

Quinhagak and Goodnews Bay streams were currently open. The Sport Fish Division was waiting to see the results of the first commercial opener in Quinhagak and Goodnews Bay before considering restrictions there: "... if the Chinook catch is poor we will most likely make a bag limit restriction in Kuskokwim Bay streams."

COMMERCIAL CATCH REPORT:

Nick Souza (Processor member, Coastal Villages Seafoods) reported that on June 23, CVS distributed free 6-inch gillnet webbing out of its Bethel office. Within an hour, over 150 people were on the list to receive webbing, which was given on a first-come first-serve basis. Nick announced that CVS was still trying to acquire 200 nets to donate and anyone interested could sign up for the waiting list.

COMMENTS

Bev Hoffman suggested making this distribution of nets income-based, and preferentially for village residents. She also requested an electronic copy of the paperwork that people had to sign to receive the mesh. Greg Roczicka agreed on the point of how to distribute nets, because many commercial fishermen in Bethel may already have 6-inch nets.

Casie Stockdale (AVCP) explained that AVCP had initiated the idea of processors donating 6-inch nets to fishermen who needed them. She greatly appreciated CVS participating, but she expressed regret that those expediting the distribution process had not consulted with AVCP, as she had intended to furnish a list of individuals that should receive nets based on the criteria listed above.

Chris Shelden (ADF&G) commented that CVS's generosity should not be forgotten despite disagreement with how the nets were distributed, and the Chair agreed.

WEATHER FORECAST:

The weather was rainy with a forecast of partly cloudy later in the week.

RECOMMENDATION:

ADF&G did not have a recommendation at this time.

Travis Elison (ADF&G Acting Area Manager) explained that ADF&G met last night with USFWS Refuge staff to examine available information: BTF numbers; Section 1 and Section 2 subsistence harvest reports; aerial observations of fishing activity from the evening prior (Akiak down to Eek Island) and the week before (Quinhagak up to Akiachak).

- Travis observed 15 boats fishing on the high tide when Section 1 opened on June 22. The prior evening, June 25th, he had observed 7 boats fishing on the high tide. The prior weekend, fishermen had reported that weather had prevented fishing.
- People in the lower river were catching plenty of fish, even if they were not catching as many Chinook as they wanted. Reports remained consistent that 6-inch mesh catches many chum and sockeye. Those illegally fishing with 8-inch gear were catching many Chinook; which was hampering the effort to conserve Chinook for the future.

At this time, John Linderman (ADF&G Regional Supervisor) called into the meeting. He said, "The expectation was that the number of chum and sockeye was high enough for what we call 'a saturation effect,' that the number of king salmon being harvested would be low. The primary concern here, as Travis was referencing, was... the level of Chinook harvest that is being taken, with respect to any mesh size." John described a need to discuss these concerns privately with agency staff.

Bev Hoffman: "I do not, as Chair, want you to go behind closed doors." She then asked other KRSMWG members for their input. The issue of ADF&G and USFWS having mid-meeting private caucuses became a lengthy discussion:

- Ray Collins said, "Discuss away, we will all listen."
- Fritz Charles said, "If we have to change our ways of life....so can the staff of the state and federal laws change their ways of practice in front of the Working Group members." A few minutes later he reminded the group that all the KRSMWG members were volunteers.
- Gene Peltola (USFWS) explained that their intent was not to make "backdoor" decisions; rather, it was to make appropriate decisions. He needed to look at more data before making a recommendation. Bev Hoffman replied that she would like to see the data, too.
- Travis Elison explained that the recommendation has to be from the Department, not from an individual, which is why he has to confer with his leadership.
- John Linderman reminded the KRSMWG that ADF&G and USFWS agreed to wait and hear what the public had to say before making a recommendation today. These mid-meeting caucuses were the same as the daily discussions between agencies. Like Gene Peltola, he was not comfortable making a recommendation at this point.
- Evelyn Thomas asked, "How can we as a Working Group make informed decisions if we are not part of that discussion?" She was frustrated because, from her perspective, "no matter what we tell you, you are going to do what you are going to do."
- Robert Sundown told the KRSMWG that the issue was solidarity of federal and state agencies, each working under separate mandates, per request by the KRSMWG for staff to have a single voice. He pointed out, "we are not hiding the science, it is in front of you."
- Lamont Albertson commented that he was interested in the recommendation from ADF&G and USFWS, "not their personal dynamics." He has "greatest respect for the professionalism of both groups" and he did not think that there was a problem with the agencies wanting to meet with each other. Lamont was interested in reacting to their recommendation, instead.

Regarding the recommendation, John Linderman stated that ADF&G would like to extend the 6-inch gillnet mesh openings in each section. However, first he wanted to consider the recent harvest levels of Chinook presented in today's subsistence reports. Kevin Schaberg (ADF&G) reiterated that the agencies did not want to rush in to a decision.

Bev Hoffman, acting Chair person, was invited to attend the 15-minute caucus.

ADF&G returned from the caucus and stated that they still did not have a recommendation. The agencies needed a few more hours to look at data continually coming in from Bethel Test Fish, law enforcement, and subsistence users.

Travis Elison then asked for a recommendation from the KRSMWG (See Motion 2 and Motion 3).

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

MOTION 1: Approval of the agenda. Motion passed unanimously (8 yeas).

MOTION 2: Recommendation to extend subsistence fishing openings 3 additional days to 6-inch or smaller mesh gillnets in Rolling Closures Section 2. Motion failed (5 yeas, 1 nay, and 1 abstention).

COMMENTS FOR MOTION 2:

Mike Williams recommended extending fishing opportunity. He also acknowledged that over the years federal and state agencies have made much effort to "keep an open line of communication" with the KRSMWG. For instance, managers took the time to fly to communities to explain regulations/management actions. Mike respects the authorities, the elders, and the fishermen. He said, "We must continue to work together in a partnership that is sacred."

Fritz Charles did not want Commercial Fishing to occur in Districts 4 and 5 because he disagreed with commercial fishermen catching Chinook, even though they were a different stock than Kuskokwim River fish. He believed that "a king salmon is a king salmon." Fritz then made Motion 2.

Lamont Albertson commented that he could support 2-day extensions. Upriver communities were worried about the Bethel "bottleneck" and a potentially weak run.

Greg Roczicka reported that he had seen minimal Chinook catches and that mostly males were being harvested. One fisherman he talked to caught 5 or 10 small Chinook, 50 sockeye, and 70 chum. He did not think that 3-day extensions would adversely impact escapement.

Gene Peltola clarified that agency staff asked for more time because of the consequences of their decisions for subsistence users and the salmon run. He said that USFWS would consider 2-day or 3-day extensions.

Mike Williams wanted to open subsistence fishing indefinitely. He claimed that people in the Akiak area had enough chums and sockeye so future catches would be limited. He supported Motion 2 because short openings could possibly create "combat fishing."

Douglas Kernak commented that chums seemed to be at their peak now. He knew someone who caught over 200.

Bev Hoffman commented, "It's not going to hurt to have a 3-day extension in Section 2." She acknowledged that people fish hard in Bethel and that the Bethel area takes the bulk of the subsistence harvest. However, she did not think that fishermen would target Chinook because most people were finished fishing.

Mark Leary remarked that he understood that downriver people would like to fish, but they need to think about upriver, too.

MOTION 3: To recommend that ADF&G extend subsistence fishing opportunity with 6-inch or smaller mesh gillnets, in Rolling Closures Section 2, an additional 3 days. Furthermore, the duration of rolling closures in Sections 3, 4, and 5 would be reduced from 12 days to 10 days. Motion passed unanimously (7 yeas).

COMMENTS FOR MOTION 3:

After the motion passed, Bev Hoffman asked ADF&G and USFWS if the motion could be adopted. Gene Peltola said he "could lean toward the motion," but wanted to give ADF&G time to consider it. The agencies stated that a decision would be made that afternoon and per request, the Chair would be notified.

ADF&G issued News Release 10 the next morning, which extended subsistence openings for 6-inch mesh gillnets in Sections 2, 3, 4, and 5. The Department took the KRSMWG's advice to lift remaining rolling closures in Sections 4 and 5, making an official decision on that point during the July 7th meeting.

OLD BUSINESS:

1.) Old business items tabled until later in the season.

NEW BUSINESS:

1.) The tundra villages of Atmautluak, Nunapitchuk, and Kasigluk sent a letter to the KRSMWG expressing collective directives. KRSMWG members had no comments.

GENERAL COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:

KRSMWG members agreed that this was "a long, hard meeting."

Carl Morgan thanked the KRSMWG for cooperating on such a long, hard decision.

Mark Leary appreciated the lower river's support in reducing upriver subsistence fishing closures.

Mike Williams commented that he believed that people upriver would take only what they needed and consider Chinook conservation efforts.

Bev Hoffman thanked ADF&G and USFWS for listening to the KRSMWG.

WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:

MEMBER SEAT:	NAME:
UPRIVER ELDER	<i>Vacant</i>
DOWNRIVER ELDER	Absent
COMMERCIAL FISHER	Absent
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSTENCE	Gerald Simeon
UPPER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mark Leary
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	Absent
PROCESSOR	Nick Souza (CVS)
MEMBER AT LARGE	Fritz Charles
SPORT FISHER	Lamont Albertson
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Carl Morgan
Y-K DELTA RAC	Absent
ADF&G	Travis Elison
CHAIR	Bev Hoffman

Other Participants:	
<p><u>ADF&G Comm. Fish</u> : John Linderman, Dan Bergstrom, Travis Elison, Kevin Schaberg, Alice Bailey, Chris Shelden, Zach Liller, Jordan Palmer, Cara Lucas, Amy Brodersen</p> <p><u>Sport Fish</u> : Tom Taube</p> <p><u>Subsistence Division</u>: Jeff Park, Hiroku Ikuta, Andrew Brenner, Dave Runfola</p>	
<p><u>USFWS</u>: Gene Peltola, Jr., Steve Miller, Dan Gillikin, Tom Doolittle, Robert Sundown, Ken Actin</p> <p><u>OSM</u>: Don Rivard, George Papas, Pippa Kenner, Kevin Bartley, Pete Probasco</p>	
<p>Mike Thalhauser (KNA) LaDonn Robbins (KNA) Becca Robbins Gisclair (YRDFA) Dave Cannon Megan Leary Edward Nikolai Willie Kasayulie Philip Peter John Wallace Alan Joseph Doug Molyneaux Casie Stockdale (AVCP) Douglas Kernak</p>	<p>Greg Roczicka (alternate member) Angela Morgan (alternate member) Meyer Hutchinson (Senator Hoffman's office) Gerri Sumpter (Senator Murkowski's office) Agatha Ericksen (Senator Begich's office) Shawna Thoma (Senator Begich's office) Aggie Gregory Winchow Tikner (Nikolai City Office) Boris Epchook Angela Denning-Barnes (KYUK) Carl Berger (Lower Kuskokwim Economic Development Council) Rhonda McBride (KTUU Anchorage news)</p>

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**), Management Objective (**MO**), Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence (**ANS**), Emergency Order (**EO**)