

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

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Meeting Summary

July 24, 2013

Meeting called to order at 10:00 am and adjourned at 11:50 pm at ADF&G in Bethel. Seven full voting members were present and a quorum was established.

AGENDA ITEMS:

Continuing Business: Run assessment and management actions.

Old Business Discussion Topics: none

New Business Discussion Topics:

- Invitation for a Working Group representative to attend Unalakleet Chinook Summit

WORKING GROUP ACTION ITEMS: none

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

1. Approval of the agenda as amended. Motion passed unanimously.
2. To accept the ADF&G Recommendation to open commercial salmon fishing in Kuskokwim River Subdistrict 1-B on Friday, July 26, for four hours in the upper section and six hours in the lower section. *Please see 2013 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery News Release 11 for details.* Motion passed (6 yeas, 1 nay).
3. To send Beverly Hoffman to represent the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group at the August 16 Chinook Salmon Summit in Unalakleet. Motion passed unanimously.
4. To schedule the next Working Group meeting for Tuesday, July 30, in order to discuss implementing a commercial fishing schedule for Coho salmon; and to request that ADF&G does not have another opening prior to meeting with the WG in Subdistrict 1-B that day. Motion passed unanimously.

PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:

1. Cindy Jacobson, with the Office of Science Applications at USFWS in Anchorage, explained that her division looks at "the larger landscape perspective of conservation," and issues such as climate change. She said, "In order to address those larger challenges we need to work together collaboratively and collectively, like you are doing here today." She thanked the Working Group for having her and Joel Reynolds at the meeting.
2. Joel Reynolds said that three years ago the US Department of the Interior set up a network of 22 Landscape Conservation Cooperatives across the continent. He said that his organization tries to work across agencies and groups in order to identify "shared partner needs" and distribute information. As the Science Coordinator for the Western Alaska Cooperative, he explained that he works with three Native

Alaska representatives, one of whom is Tim Andrew. Tom Doolittle (USFWS) commented that his staff wanted to make sure that Cindy and Joel learned about the scientific and social aspects of conservation in the Kuskokwim 'region.' Bev Hoffman (Chair) asked Joel to give a report at the next Kuskokwim Area Interagency Meeting, to which he agreed. Mike Williams (Lower River Subsistence) commented that he has been focusing on the impacts of climate change in Western Alaska and he was pleased to have Joel and Cindy visiting the region.

3. John Andrew (YK Delta RAC) gave a report from a village meeting in Kwethluk, at which people had told him that they were devastated to see low escapements on tributaries year after year. He commented that the village was especially concerned about 2013 Kwethluk weir passage.
4. Mike Williams (Lower River Subsistence) acknowledged a resolution from the village of Akiak that had been presented in the July 24 Information Packet. He said that he would be willing to discuss it at the next Working Group meeting.

CONTINUING BUSINESS:

Subsistence Reports

- Lower River Reports:

Mike Williams commented that everyone was finished fishing except for salting a few fish, freezing silvers, or catching dinner. Mike said that some people who boated up the Kisaralik thought that they saw schools of Chinook salmon resting in eddies. Mike commented, "We are very concerned about escapement numbers. We need to look at all the impacts..." He also reported that salmonberries were ripe.

Greg Rockzicka (Lower River Subsistence Alternate) commented that people were only concerned about picking salmonberries now.

Bev Hoffman said that she had heard comments that maybe the lower river is happy because some people had overfished. She said, "We take only what we need, but there is not enough for everybody to take what they need." She said that at least five people in the last week asked that the Working Group take a stronger stand on management strategies. Bev remarked that the [escapement] numbers she has shared were very upsetting to people, and they told her that "we have not done a very good job in managing."

Dave Cannon (Middle River Subsistence) commented that he saw a couple of people fishing with driftnets in Aniak and that everyone he talked to was very concerned about Chinook escapement. He also said that most people were focused on picking berries now.

- KNA Inseason Subsistence Reports:

Dan Gillikin (KNA) said that KNA did not have a formal report for last week. He commented that only a few people were still using larger gear to catch Chinook but that they were mostly catching chum salmon.

- Upper River Subsistence Reports:

Mark Leary (Upriver Subsistence) offered an observation from 2008, one of the parent years of the 2013 Chinook run. Mark said that the river thawed after it initially froze, causing extremely high water levels that displaced massive amounts of gravel. He said, "I remember thinking at that time, I wonder what happened to all the fish eggs." In response, Zachary Liller (ADF&G) said that if those eggs were destroyed he would expect to see very few fish return from that year. He said that age compositions collected by Bethel Test Fish look "pretty normal" so far, and he would update the Working Group once he had processed more scales from escapement projects.

Barbara Carlson said that people were "pretty much done" fishing for salmon, except for rod and reeling for Coho. Some people were also catching whitefish to mix with salmonberries for *akutak*. She said that after looking at escapement numbers at Kogrukluq weir, several people said, "We should have been tougher on ourselves from the beginning." Barbara said that more than one person suggested starting the 2014 season closed, then opening subsistence fishing periods by Emergency Order.

LaMont Albertson said that we need to stop fishing for Chinook on the Aniak River. He also quoted the former YK Delta refuge manager, Mike Rearden, in which Mike had remarked, "One thing that everybody understands is the difference between presence and absence." LaMont finished by stating "There is an absence of king salmon in the Kuskokwim drainage this year."

Overview of Kuskokwim River salmon run assessment projects:

- **Bethel Test Fishery:**

Colton Lipka (ADF&G) reported average water temperature and an improvement in water clarity.

Chinook Salmon

Colton Lipka (ADF&G) said that BTF had been only fishing 5-inch gear since July 15, and that it had been a few days since a Chinook salmon had been caught.

Kevin Schaberg (ADF&G) commented that the Bethel Test Fish Late Run Timing Tool still indicated that the BTF target for Chinook salmon, which would project an achieved escapement in 2013, still might be achieved (cumulative index of 276, which equates to 85,000 fish), but that the likelihood was low given recent BTF performance. Kevin explained that the run seemed to have abated sooner than expected.

Chum

Colton Lipka commented that the chum salmon CPUE was tracking similar to previous years.

Sockeye

Colton reported that two days had passed since BTF caught a sockeye salmon. He said that the run was similar to 2012 and previous years, and peaked about June 24th-25th.

Bev Hoffman requested seeing a table and figure for BTF Coho induces at the next meeting.

Discussion:

Dan Gillikin asked Kevin Schaberg if he had an explanation for the discrepancy between BTF and escapement numbers. Kevin replied that the relationship between the test fishery and escapement projects "was not exact" because it had an error range of 50,000 fish. Kevin said that the main difficulty of using the tool was predicting run timing: "The run came in late this year and we interpreted that as late run timing, and it looked like everything was moving along well in the first couple weeks." Kevin said that in retrospect it seems to have been "early-late" run timing or "late-average" run timing, which changes the interpretation of the BTF tool. He commented that, even with some of the marine metrics of identifying when the run is going to start, "We don't really know when the run is going to end. This year we were all caught off guard...when the run ended..."

Dan Gillikin asked if there had been any changes in subsistence harvest patterns this year. Kevin Schaberg replied that he believed that harvest had been "front loaded" because the run came in late and everyone was ready to fish. He explained that more harvest effort information would have to be studied post-season. Dan Gillikin asked if there had been increased harvest above the BTF site compared to previous years, and Kevin replied, "not that I am aware of," and that the majority of the fishing effort in Bethel occurs below the site. Kevin said that he assumes effort above BTF was consistent with past years.

Casie Stockdale asked how achievement of the drainage-wide escapement goal will be assessed post-season. Kevin Schaberg replied that the assessment will be based on the run reconstruction. He explained that the run reconstruction takes data from escapement projects and aerial surveys, runs the data through the run reconstruction model, and then combines the result with harvest estimates from subsistence surveys to get what the total run and total escapement would be. Kevin then added, "What do we do about Kwethluk? Kwethluk is different for some reason, somehow. How we account for that, or do we account for that, is something we will have to put in the mix."

Tom Doolittle commented that he had recently visited the Kwethluk weir and observed that chum had started to show up more heavily. He said, "Some of the biggest concerns that we have [appear] when we looked at juvenile salmon at our monitoring sites on the upper Kwethluk.....[in 2013] we have come up with zero for Chinook." Tom also commented that there seemed to be confusion by people other than staff about the identification of sockeye versus Chinook salmon.

Ken Harper (USFWS) commented on the need to account for storm events, like the one Mark Leary mentioned earlier, with regard to effects on salmon biology: "That just needs to be built into the mix so [management target] may have to be a higher number than 85,000, just so we have enough fish going up to other tributaries." Ken also commented that late runs are usually weak runs, so "we can't expect to fish like we normally do." Kevin Schaberg said that he agreed with Ken that late runs are weaker, but reiterated that this run could have had a late average timing. Kevin added that predicting when the run is going to come to an end is one of the most difficult aspects of managing the fishery.

Casie Stockdale asked what had been different about Kwethluk River escapement this year. Kevin Schaberg explained that it was unusual for all salmon species to have extremely low escapement numbers at the same time, and with no indication from other weirs that this should be so. He said that biologists did not know why but suggested that lower river fishing pressure could be a factor. But he pointed out that the 6-inch mesh restrictions had been initiated at a time that should have protected Kwethluk bound kings.

- **Weirs:**

Brittany Blain (ADF&G) gave updates on all salmon escapement projects. *Please see July 25 Information Packet for tables and figures.* Brittany commented that she recently visited Tatlawiksuk and George River weirs, and people in Georgetown told her that they were very happy with their subsistence sockeye harvest.

Operational Summary: Since the last meeting, all weirs had been operational and water levels were at good levels for fish counts.

Chinook: Relative to past years, Chinook salmon escapement was low. Passage percentages for Chinook are based on late run timing.

- Kwethluk River weir escapement was the lowest on record, with 80% of the run passed;
- Tuluksak River weir was tracking between 2010 and 2011, with 67% of the run passed;
- Salmon River weir (Aniak) below lower than 2008 and 2007 (too few years to estimate the point in the run);
- George River weir had passed about 90% of run and has not achieved the lower end of the escapement goal for that tributary;
- Kogrukluk River weir escapement was lower than previous years, with about 70% passed;
- Tatlawiksuk River weir escapement was similar to 2010 and was with about 85% of the run passed;
- Takotna River weir was seeing low escapement with 65% passed.

Chum:

- Kwethluk River weir escapement was lowest to date with 50% passed (based on late run timing);
- Tuluksak River weir escapement was tracking similar to other years and with 60% passed (based on average run timing);
- Salmon River weir passage was similar to 2008;
- George River weir escapement was at 75% (based on average run timing), and tracking similar to 2006, which had been the third highest escapement to date;
- Kogrukluk River weir escapement passed the upper bound of the escapement goal and was at 75% passage;
- Tatlawiksuk River weir was tracking similar to 2006 and was at 80% passage;
- Takotna River weir escapement was similar to 2012 and was at 70% passage.

Sockeye:

- Kwethluk River weir escapement was tracking low.

- Salmon River weir escapement was similar to 2007 and 2008.
- Kogrukluk River weir passed the lower end of the escapement goal.
- Talaquana River weir escapement was tracking similar to 2011.

Coho:

- Brittany Blain commented that the Kwethluk, Tuluksak, and Talaquana weirs had all seen Coho.

Discussion:

Tom Doolittle said he did not think that the Kwethluk weir had reached 80% of passage, and that they would know more after another week of data. Bev Hoffman commented that the escapement numbers for Chinook “were pretty dismal.”

Bev Hoffman noted that Mark Leary’s observation of extreme weather in 2008 did not appear to have affected chum salmon eggs or returns. Brittany Blain responded that 2008 had been one of the latest runs for chum salmon.

Barbara Carlson asked about the impact of “too many” salmon on the spawning grounds. Specifically, she asked if the low number of spawning Chinook will be affected by the abundance of chum. Zach Liller (ADF&G) replied that there are typically more chum salmon than Chinook salmon in the Kuskokwim River, so he did not have serious concerns right now. He also noted that there is some separation between the habitats in which the two species spawn.

- **Aerial Surveys:**

Robert Sundown (USFWS) gave a report from a survey he flew over the Kwethluk and Kisaralik Rivers on July 23. Robert made it clear that his results were not meant to be compared ADF&G aerial surveys in which a standard methodology is used each year. He reported that he and his co-worker observed fewer than 75 Chinook salmon on the Kwethluk River, and approximately half that amount on the Kisaralik. He said that the purpose of the survey was to define a presence or absence of Chinook salmon, which he found to be “clearly absent.” He said, “It was dismal on the Kwethluk, and even worse on the Kisaralik.” Robert noted that the water was very clear, there were no issues with visibility, and no observed fish “stacking” below the weir. He said that all the Chinook observed on the Kisaralik were below Red Rock, except for some farther upriver near the falls.

Aaron Tiernan (ADF&G) commented that ADF&G would begin aerial surveys on lower Kuskokwim tributaries and Kuskokwim Bay on July 27. He said that the surveys would be finished by mid-August.

Discussion

USFWS does not have any more aerial surveys planned, but Tom Doolittle said that sampling crews will be in Chinook areas until the beginning of August.

John Linderman expressed appreciation for Robert Sundown’s report, and commented that the Kwethluk doesn’t seem to be the only outlier, considering that the Kisaralik also had low counts. He explained that the annual ADF&G aerial surveys are timed to occur at the peak of Chinook spawning each year for historical comparability. John commented, “It will be very interesting to see what [the 2013 survey] number shows, in comparison to what Robert reported.”

Kevin Schaberg commented that ADF&G Chinook aerial survey counts on the Kisaralik River had been 235 in 2010, 534 in 2011, and 610 in 2012.

Casie Stockdale asked if ADF&G aerial surveys were always flown by the same people. Aaron Tiernan replied that Justin Cross has been flying surveys upriver for 5 years. He said that this will be his first year flying surveys in the lower Kuskokwim River tributaries and Bay Rivers.

Commercial Catch Report:

Aaron Tiernan reported that 47 sockeye, approximately 6,000 chum, and about 3,000 Coho had been harvested in the July 23 opener in Kuskokwim River Subdistrict 1-B. He said that the upriver section of 1-B harvested the majority of chum and the lower section harvested the majority of Coho. Aaron said that 218 permit holders fished during the July 23 opener, which was slightly above average. He noted that only 12 Chinook had been harvested incidentally, all in the upper section. He said that a total of 150 Chinook salmon have been reported on fish tickets this year, and all were retained by fishermen for personal use.

When asked to comment about Kuskokwim Bay, Aaron reported that commercial fishing in Kuskokwim Bay had moved to scheduled openers for "the foreseeable future." He said that both the Goodnews and Kanektok River weirs had achieved escapement goals for sockeye and chum, identifying a harvestable surplus. Aaron said that conservation efforts taken in 2013 had resulted in higher Chinook escapements at Goodnews River weir than in 2012. He said that Chinook escapements at Kanektok River weir were better than last year, but below desired levels. Bev Hoffman asked Aaron how many Chinook had been harvested, and Aaron replied that it was less than 2012, and he would get back to her with an exact figure.

Processor Report: none

Sport Fish Report:

John Chythlook (ADF&G) commented that sport fishing for Chinook had been closed for most of the season in both the Kuskokwim River and Kuskokwim Bay, and would remain so through the end of the Chinook run. He said that the EO's issued earlier in the season would expire on July 25th, but will be replaced by regulation that will extend Chinook sport closures for the rest of the year. In response to a question from Dave Cannon's , John said that all EO's are distributed to local outfitters and that most guides already know that the regulatory closure will be continued on July 26th. He clarified that the general Chinook closure does not apply to subsistence rod and reel fishing.

Intercept Fishery Report: none

Weather Forecast:

The forecast for the Kuskokwim was sunshine through the rest of the week and northwest winds of 10-15 mph. No south or southwesterly winds were forecasted.

ADF&G Recommendation: To open commercial salmon fishing in Kuskokwim River Subdistrict 1-B on Friday, July 26, for four hours in the upper section and six hours in the lower section. *Please see 2013 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery News Release 11 for details.*

Discussion:

Bev Hoffman asked how many commercial periods ADF&G was anticipating. Aaron Tiernan replied that managers would continue to look at run assessment projects and see how the July 26 catch was, and possibly implement at Tuesday/Friday schedule soon.

Greg Roczicka stated that he supported the recommendation. He also said that we may want to hold off implementing a commercial fishing schedule for another week because many people planned to harvest Coho instead of Chinook for subsistence, and he didn't want the commercial fishery to interfere.

Kevin Schaberg commented that forecasting Coho runs was difficult, but the current BTF index was two to three times better than 2010 and 2012.

OLD BUSINESS: none

NEW BUSINESS:

- **Invitation for a Working Group representative to attend Unalakleet Chinook Summit on August 16**

Bev Hoffman said that she had been invited by Unalakleet to represent the Working Group at an upcoming Chinook Salmon Summit. She asked whether the Working Group would agree to have her attend as their representative. Bev explained that the Yukon River and Norton Sound were also sending representatives. She said, "I believe that we will hear some of the same reports that we hear at the Working Group meetings, but I do believe that reports from the different groups (stakeholders) will be coming up with strategies and suggestions" that the Working Group might wish to consider. She requested that members email her with their comments so that she could properly represent the range of opinions on the Working Group: bev@kuskofish.com.

Casie Stockdale elaborated that the Southern Norton Sound Advisory Council had specifically asked for an official Working Group representative, and that they want to work with other stakeholder groups.

Dave Cannon offered to be an alternate representative.

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

MOTION 1: To accept the agenda as amended. Motion passed unanimously (9 yeas, 0 nays).

MOTION 2: To accept the ADF&G Recommendation to open commercial salmon fishing in Kuskokwim River Subdistrict 1-B on Friday, July 26, for four hours in the upper section and six hours in the lower section. *Please see 2013 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery News Release 11 for details.* Motion passed (6 yeas, 1 nay).

COMMENTS FOR MOTION 2: *Please see Discussion following the ADF&G Recommendation in Continuing Business.*

MOTION 3: To send Beverly Hoffman to represent the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group at the August 16 Chinook Salmon Summit in Unalakleet. Motion passed unanimously (9 yeas, 0 nays).

COMMENTS FOR MOTION 3: *Please see Discussion under New Business.*

MOTION 4: To schedule the next Working Group meeting for Tuesday, July 30, in order to discuss implementing a commercial fishing schedule for Coho salmon; and to request that ADF&G does not have an opener in Subdistrict 1-B that day. Motion passed unanimously (9 yeas, 0 nays).

GENERAL COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:

LaMont Albertson: "We've got some soul searching and some work that we've got to do."

Fritz Charles commented that after seeing the most recent Chinook numbers, "It's the worst year yet." He said that he hopes the run improves, but pointed out that "It's everybody's fault. It's not downriver, it's not upriver. It's everybody. We all screwed up this year...We should have [taken] action from the get-go, regardless of what projections were, but now we are going to pay for it down the road...Like I've said in the past, we all have to work together regardless of what happens." Fritz also commented that there is not enough time at the Interagency Meeting to brainstorm strategies in case "something like this happens." He requested an additional day for this purpose. Bev Hoffman suggested having a late August strategy meeting, where ideas would be discussed regardless of projections. Tom Doolittle added that USFWS would be going village to village to gather input about Chinook salmon.

Henry Lupie commented that perhaps Bethel Test Fish did not have high numbers because there was not a south wind to push fish into the river.

Barbara Carlson agreed that a late summer strategy meeting would be useful "while it's fresh in our minds...because it's so easy once spring comes to start being more optimistic, especially if the projected numbers look good." She said she hopes that Bev Hoffman comes back from Unalakleet with some good alternative management ideas that worked in other places. She said, "Sometimes our repertoire of things that we can do to control ourselves is limited, so the more input we have from other folks in other areas on what they've done to help conserve Chinook, the more alternatives we have to put in the pot that we can use in this coming year."

Dave Cannon thanked Fritz Charles for his comments. He said that he moved to Bethel in 1998 and was alarmed by several years of low Chinook runs, which rebounded in 2005. Dave commented that ADF&G has explained that salmon return in cycles, but the last few years we have been in "conservation mode." Dave said that, "We really need to work together in the next year. These numbers are lower than anyone has documented in the past."

Greg Roczicka agreed that we "need to take a look at things." However, he said that we don't need to assign blame because "our management actions made sense at the time" (referring to earlier in the season). He said, "Our fish are going out and they are not coming back...We have to prepare not to be as blind-sided as we were this year." He agreed that some level of pro-active restrictions may be called for, such as starting the subsistence fishing season with a closure then reopening it.

Casie Stockdale said she "respectfully disagreed" with Greg. She said that there were many indications of low Chinook returns at the beginning of the season, so "we should have been in conservation mode." She agreed with Fritz that we "messed up" and just kept thinking that the run was late, until it was over. Casie stated, "I think that it's all of

our faults." She also said that she agrees with having an August strategy meeting, and suggested having a KYUK talk show before and afterwards.

Bev Hoffman said she agreed that an August meeting would be a good opportunity to strategize for future years and to take ideas back to Tribal Councils and other agencies.

Aaron Tiernan remarked, "I really appreciate everyone's comments and concerns, and will take them back after the meeting and take them into account."

WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:

MEMBER SEAT:	NAME:
DOWNRIVER ELDER	<i>Absent</i>
UPRIVER ELDER	<i>Vacant</i>
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams/Greg Roczicka
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Dave Cannon
UPRIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mark Leary
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	<i>Absent</i>
MEMBER AT LARGE	Fritz Charles
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	<i>Absent</i>
YK DELTA RAC	John W. Andrew
COMMERCIAL FISHING	Greg Hoffman, Jr.
SPORT FISHING	LaMont Albertson
PROCESSOR	<i>Absent</i>
ADF&G	Aaron Tiernan
CHAIR	Bev Hoffman

Other Participants:	
<p>ADF&G Comm. Fish: Aaron Tiernan, Chris Shelden, Alice Bailey, John Linderman, Kara Lucas, Colton Lipka, Corrine Truesdale, Brittany Blain, Zach Liller, Rose Wallin, Kevin Schaberg, Sarah Adams</p> <p>Sport Fish: John Chythlook</p> <p>Subsistence Division: Hiroko Ikuta</p>	
<p>USFWS: Tom Doolittle, Steve Miller, Robert Sundown, Cindy Jacobson</p> <p>OSM: George Papas, Pippa Kenner, Trent Liebich, Ken Harper</p>	
<p>Kate Schaberg (Georgetown)</p> <p>Dan Gillikin (KNA)</p> <p>Joe</p> <p>Megan Leary (Napaimute)</p>	<p>Casie Stockdale (Downriver Subsistence alternate)</p> <p>Barbara Carlson (Upriver Subsistence)</p> <p>Gerri Sumpter (Senator Murkowski)</p> <p>Charlie Brown (Commercial Fishing)- arrived 11:15 am</p> <p>Joe Reynolds (Western AK Landscape Conservation)</p>

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**, **Working Group**, or **WG**), Sustainable Escapement Goal (**SEG**), Biological Escapement Goal (**BEG**), Management Objective (**MO**), Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence (**ANS**), Emergency Order (**EO**)