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2023 NORTON SOUND SALMON MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK

INTRODUCTION

Norton Sound consists of two fishing districts: Norton Sound and Port Clarence (Figure 1). The Norton Sound District extends from Cape Douglas south to Point Romanof and includes over 500 miles of coastline. Commercial salmon fishing is divided into six subdistricts with each subdistrict containing at least one major spawning stream. The Port Clarence District consists of waters from Cape Douglas north to Cape Prince of Wales.

Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G; department) projects in 2023 include: Kwiniuk River counting tower; Nome River weir; periodic aerial surveys of index spawning streams; and catch sampling and monitoring efforts at Nome and Unalakleet. Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) funds numerous salmon projects and takes part in cooperative projects with ADF&G, tribal, as well as federal entities. The Unalakleet River weir is a cooperative project between the department, the Bureau of Land Management, and NSEDC with funding providing by United States Fish and Wildlife Service – Office of Subsistence Management on land leased from the Unalakleet Native Cooperation. Department staff tracks salmon escapement reported from NSEDC projects on the North, Snake, Niukluk, Shaktoolik, Ungalik, Inglutalik, Eldorado, and Pilgrim Rivers.

One commercial salmon buyer is expected to operate in Norton Sound in 2023. The department expects commercial fishing openings for pink and coho salmon, but an expected poor run of chum salmon may result in limited direct openings for chum salmon.

2023 RUN OUTLOOK

Salmon outlooks and harvest projections for the 2023 salmon season are based on qualitative assessments of parent-year escapements, sibling relationships, subjective determinations of freshwater overwintering and ocean survival, and the projections of local market conditions. The department expects 2023 coho salmon run to be similar to the 2022 return. Chum salmon is expected to be poor with Northern Norton Sound being stronger than runs in Southern Norton Sound. Chinook salmon is expected weak and similar to, or slightly lower, than last year's run. Subsistence fishing will close June 15 in the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts. The department plans on opening a weekly 24-hour subsistence fishing period in the marine waters of Subdistricts 5 and 6 with gear restricted to 6 inches or smaller in an attempt to conserve king salmon for escapement needs. No directed commercial fishing for Chinook salmon is expected and the sale of incidentally caught Chinook salmon in commercial fisheries will not be allowed if subsistence fishing is closed. The department will monitor king salmon escapements closely and may relax restrictions to conserve king salmon if escapement warrants harvest. Chum salmon harvest is forecasted to be 25,000 to 50,000 fish with most the harvest expected as incidental catch in the pink and coho salmon fishery and potentially stronger runs in the Northern Norton Sound area. The department expects the pink salmon run to be average for an odd-numbered year; however, well below the record runs of recent odd-numbered runs. Odd-numbered years are consistently smaller than even-numbered years and pink salmon harvest could reach 50,000 to 100,000 fish. The coho salmon run is expected to be like last year as below average ocean survival conditions in recent years continue and the commercial harvest is expected to be 25,000

to 75,000 fish. In the Port Clarence District, the commercial fishery will remain closed because the threshold of 30,000 sockeye salmon to the Pilgrim River to allow for a commercial fishery is not expected to be reached and lack of market interest. The department expects a similar run to last year and subsistence fishing will close in the Pilgrim River on June 15 to net fishing. The department will closely monitor sockeye salmon escapement to the Pilgrim River and may relax subsistence fishing restrictions if the run is projected to reach minimum sockeye escapement objectives.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Department staff will manage salmon fisheries conservatively in 2023 in an attempt to ensure escapement goals are achieved. Commercial fishing will occur if an adequate surplus of salmon above escapement and subsistence needs are identified depending on market availability. Informational updates will be broadcast periodically over Nome public radio stations and Advisory Announcements sent to the Unalakleet radio station for broadcast to inform fishermen of current regulations, catches, escapements, and ADF&G activities. The public may call the Nome office toll-free number at 1-800-560-2271 or the local number of 907-443-5167 or the Unalakleet field office at 907-624-3921 for information.

Because of the late break up and cold spring, river levels are expected to be higher than normal and some delays in getting escapement projects operational may occur. If escapement projects are not operational in a specific area the department will utilize escapements in an adjacent subdistrict as an index of abundance. Additionally, the department may compare historical harvest during similar time periods to determine if fishing time is warranted.

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

NOME SUBDISTRICT

The Subdistrict 1 (Nome) salmon run in 2023 is expected to be below average; however, commercial fishing targeting chum, pink, and coho salmon is likely to occur. From 2013 to 2023, the Nome Subdistrict chum salmon escapement has ranged from 31,000 to 124,000 chum salmon, but because of high water the 2021 chum salmon escapement was unknown. Three rivers have chum salmon escapement goal ranges: Eldorado (4,400 to 14,200), Nome (1,600 to 5,300) and Snake (2,000 to 4,200) and in 2022 all three rivers met, or exceed, their escapement goal ranges.

Subsistence fishing is allowed 7 days per week prior to June 15 until after August 15 in the marine waters of Subdistrict 1. From June 15 through August 15, the marine waters of Subdistrict 1 west of Cape Nome is open to set gillnet fishing on a weekly schedule from 6 p.m. Wednesdays until 6 p.m. Mondays. Marine waters east of Cape Nome remain open 7 days per week throughout the season. In the fresh waters of Subdistrict 1 prior to June 15 until after August 31 subsistence fishing is open 7 days per week. Beginning June 15 through August 31, subsistence set gillnet fishing is open on a weekly schedule from 6 p.m. Wednesdays until 6 p.m. Mondays in fresh waters. The fishing schedules listed above will be in effect unless reduced or closed by emergency order because of weaker than expected salmon runs. Dip nets and cast nets are legal gear for harvesting salmon in Norton Sound and are allowed during the set gillnet fishing periods. Additionally, beach seining is allowed during set gillnet fishing periods from June 15 through August 15.

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

The department uses Eldorado River escapements as the primary indicator of chum salmon abundance in the Nome Subdistrict east of Cape Nome. If chum salmon escapements indicate the escapement goal range will not

be met, marine and river fishing periods may be reduced, or suspended, until concerns over chum salmon harvests are mitigated. However, the Eldorado River chum salmon escapement goal has been met or exceeded in most years and is expected to be met in 2023. Additionally, aerial surveys will be used to index escapement to the Bonanza, Flambeau, and Sinuk rivers.

The department uses Nome and Snake Rivers as an indicator of chum salmon abundance in Subdistrict 1 west of Cape Nome. If weir counts indicate that chum salmon escapement goal ranges will not be achieved the department may restrict, or suspended, subsistence fishing in marine and freshwaters west of Cape Nome. By regulation, Cripple and Penny Rivers are closed to subsistence chum salmon fishing. The only sockeye salmon escapement goal range in Subdistrict 1 is on the Sinuk River (800–1,600 fish). Escapement goals for Glacial Lake have been met, or exceeded, consistently and are based on aerial survey.

Commercial fishing periods are expected in Subdistrict 1 for chum, pink, and coho salmon. Fishing periods will be based on the most up-to-date escapement information. Chum and coho salmon will have gear restricted to 6 inches and pink salmon restricted to 4 ½ inches.

GOLOVIN SUBDISTRICT

NSEDC plans to operate the Niukluk River counting tower in 2023. The tower project was operational from 1995–2012. Historically, the Niukluk River tower escapement goal and the Kwiniuk River tower escapement goal in the adjacent Elim Subdistrict both were achieved, or both not achieved in the 16 of 18 years when both were operational.

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

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

ELIM SUBDISTRICT

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

Commercial fishing for chum salmon may occur in 2023 based on a harvestable surplus of chum salmon being obtained at the Kwiniuk River counting tower. Commercial fishing for chum salmon may begin in late June and will likely be limited in time compared to previous years and restricted to 6-inch maximum mesh size.

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

Commercial coho salmon openings are likely beginning the end of July with below average run strength expected. Directed fishing periods for coho salmon will have gear restricted to 6-inch maximum mesh size and pink salmon directed fishing periods will be restricted to 4 ½-inch maximum mesh size.

NORTON BAY SUBDISTRICT

In the last decade, there were record commercial harvests of pink (2012), chum (2013) and coho (2015) salmon in Subdistrict 4 (Norton Bay) but the second half of the last decade has seen very poor salmon harvests. Commercial salmon fishing harvests are expected to be below average in 2023 based on recent runs.

Since 2011, NSEDC has operated a counting tower on the Inglutalik River and the department plans to use salmon escapement counts from the project as an index to compare with other projects in 2023. NSEDC also plans to have a counting tower on Ungalik River for the fifth consecutive year.

No restrictions on subsistence fishing are expected this year.

SHAKTOOLIK AND UNALAKLEET SUBDISTRICTS

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

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

Beginning June 15, 2023, subsistence fishing in the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts will close to subsistence fishing in the marine and fresh waters in order to provide for conservation of king salmon returning to those subdistricts. King salmon escapements have not met escapement goals in recent years and the department is planning on managing more conservatively in 2023 in order to give more protection to king salmon migrating through the area. The department plans offering weekly subsistence opportunity in the marine waters of the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts with time and net restrictions beyond the schedule listed in regulations. The department will relax the restrictions put in place preseason if inseason indications point to king salmon having an adequate abundance to meet escapement objectives. The department will relax restrictions in July after king salmon have migrated through the area or if escapements are adequate to allow for harvest. Additionally, beach seining will be permitted starting in July; however, any king salmon caught must be immediately released unharmed.

Commercial fishing is expected to occur in the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts starting in July and will likely primarily target pink salmon. The department will restrict the sales of any incidentally caught king salmon in the commercial fishery unless inseason abundance estimates indicate that there is a large enough surplus to warrant sales.

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

ST. MICHAEL AND STEBBINS

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

PORT CLARENCE DISTRICT

No commercial fishing periods are anticipated in the Port Clarence District due to lack of market interest and the likelihood of sockeye salmon escapement estimates to the Pilgrim River not meeting the escapement threshold of 30,000 fish to allow for a commercial fishery.

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

Escapement of sockeye salmon to the Pilgrim River has been weak in recent years and has not met escapement goals (6,800-36,000 fish). In order to achieve escapement objectives, the department is closing the Pilgrim River to subsistence net fishing beginning June 15, 2023. The department will monitor escapement in the Pilgrim River closely and may relax restrictions if inseason run assessment indicates that there is a surplus above escapement needs. No other subsistence fishing closures are expected in Port Clarence District.

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

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

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2014	289	519	112,756	182,406	107,745	403,715
2015	1,288	4,199	153,929	62,888	147,497	369,801
2016	321	2,888	102,890	208,961	51,176	366,236
2017	538	2,975	191,254	20,321	163,473	378,561
2018	906	3,623	260,707	40,449	238,029	543,714
2019	1,390	7,013	139,837	76,408	157,938	382,586
2020	986	2,062	14,689	7,919	26,379	52,035
2021	15	473	7,149	289,912	6,410	303,999
2022	0	1,231	13,464	84,261	31,249	130,207
Average 2017-2021	562	3,082	122,676	86,269	118,392	330,981
Average 2012-2021	386	2,231	107,752	109,752	107,997	327,700

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

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

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

Norton Sound District - Nome Subdistrict

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

Port Clarence District

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

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

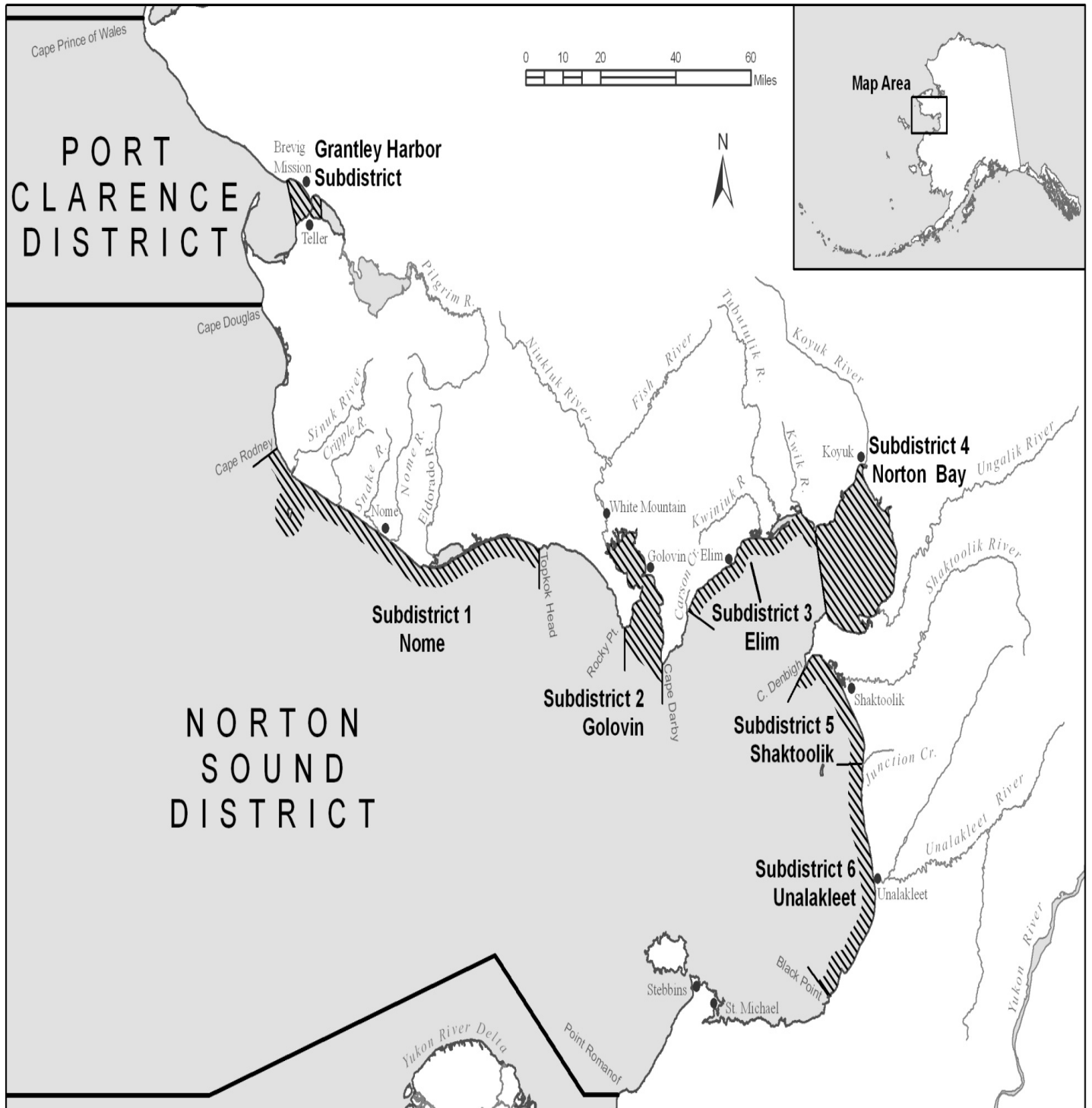


Figure 1.—Norton Sound District and Port Clarence District.