

Division of Commercial Fisheries
Forrest Bowers, Acting Director

Nome Office
PO Box 1148
Nome, AK 99762-1148



Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Doug Vincent-Lang, Commissioner

PO Box 115526
Juneau, AK 99811-5526
www.adfg.alaska.gov

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CONTACT: Kevin Clark or Luke Henslee
Norton Sound Area Manager and Asst. Manager
(907) 443-5167 or (800) 560-2271

2026 NORTON SOUND SALMON MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK

INTRODUCTION

Norton Sound contains two management districts: Norton Sound and Port Clarence (Figure 1). The Norton Sound District extends from Cape Douglas south to Point Romanof and is divided into six subdistricts with each subdistrict containing at least one primary spawning stream. The Port Clarence District consists of waters from Cape Douglas north to Cape Prince of Wales and contains the Grantly Harbor Subdistrict.

In 2026, several different assessment projects will operate within Norton Sound. The Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G; department) will operate salmon escapement monitoring projects on the Nome River (Subdistrict 1) and Kwiniuk River (Subdistrict 3), conduct periodic aerial surveys of spawning streams, as well as sample commercial harvest for biological data. The Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) operates salmon escapement monitoring projects on the Pilgrim River (Port Clarence District), Snake and Eldorado rivers (Subdistrict 1), Niukluk River (Subdistrict 2), Ungalik River (Subdistrict 4), Shaktoolik River (Subdistrict 5), and the North River (Subdistrict 6).

One commercial salmon buyer is expected to operate in Norton Sound in 2026. The department is not anticipating any directed king salmon openings or allowable sales of king salmon because of continued low abundance. Expected below average runs of chum salmon may result in delayed, limited, or no directed openings for chum salmon in Norton Sound. Coho salmon commercial opportunity is expected to occur within Southern Norton Sound similar to 2025; however, coho salmon trends of below average runs in Northern Norton Sound may require the department to limit or restrict directed coho salmon openers. Currently, limited market interest exists for pink salmon beyond those caught incidentally when targeting other species and harvest opportunities will be contingent on market interest.

2026 RUN OUTLOOK

Salmon outlooks and harvest projections for the 2026 salmon season are based on qualitative assessments. Those include parent-year escapements, sibling relationships, subjective determinations of freshwater overwintering and ocean survival, and the projections of local market conditions. Chinook salmon returns are expected to be weak and similar to last year's run with no harvestable surplus available for commercial exploitation. The department expects chum salmon to be below average. The department expects the pink salmon run to be above average for an even-numbered year based on presence of juvenile pink salmon present in Bering Sea trawl surveys. The 2026 coho salmon returns are predicted to be near the 5-year average and support limited commercial fishing opportunities.

In Norton Sound directed commercial fishing for Chinook salmon is not expected and the sale of incidentally caught Chinook salmon in commercial fisheries will not be allowed if subsistence fishing is closed in southern Norton Sound. Chum salmon harvest is forecasted to be 5,000 to 25,000 fish with most of the harvest expected as incidental catch in the coho salmon fisheries in southern Norton Sound. In even-numbered years pink salmon abundance is consistently higher than in odd-numbered years and harvest is expected to be 5,000 to 25,000 fish,

dependent on market interest. The coho salmon run is expected to be similar to last year, because of below average ocean survival conditions in recent years and the commercial harvest is expected to be 20,000 to 50,000 fish.

In the Port Clarence District, the commercial fishery is expected to remain closed because of a continued lack of market interest.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Department staff will manage salmon fisheries conservatively in 2026 to ensure escapement goals are achieved. Commercial fishing will occur if an adequate surplus of salmon above escapement and subsistence needs are identified. Informational updates will be broadcast periodically over Nome and Unalakleet public radio stations to inform harvesters of regulations, catches, escapements, and department activities. The public may call the Nome office at 1-800-560-2271 or 907-443-5167, or the Unalakleet field office at 907-624-3921 for additional information.

Low snowfall in the winter of 2025–2026 will likely result in river levels that are lower than the last several years, which saw extreme high waters early in the season and the department is hopeful that escapement projects may become operational in a timely manner. If an escapement project is 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 subsistence fishing in northern Norton Sound (from the Elim Subdistrict to the Port Clarence District) and only Alaska residents qualify for a permit. 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. A sport fish license is required when fishing with a rod and reel in southern Norton Sound, but in northern Norton Sound rod and reel is a legal subsistence gear.

NOME SUBDISTRICT

The Nome Subdistrict (Subdistrict 1) salmon run in 2026 is expected to be below average; however, commercial fishing targeting chum, pink, and coho salmon may occur. Three rivers in Subdistrict 1 have chum salmon escapement goal ranges: Eldorado (4,400–14,200), Nome (1,600–5,300) and Snake (2,000–4,200). Escapement goals were missed in Subdistrict 1 in 2025 and the department plans on starting the season conservatively in 2026.

From June 15 through August 15, subsistence fishing in the marine and fresh waters of Subdistrict 1 west of Cape Nome are open to set gillnet fishing on a weekly schedule from 6:00 p.m. Wednesdays until 6:00 p.m. Mondays. All waters east of Cape Nome remain open 7 days per week throughout the season. Beach seines, dip nets, and cast nets are legal gear for harvesting salmon in Norton Sound and are allowed during the set gillnet fishing periods. Stream-specific subsistence harvest limits exist in the Nome Subdistrict and the Port Clarence District (Table 2) and are listed on subsistence salmon fishing permits. There are no catch limits in marine waters. By regulation, Cripple and Penny Rivers are closed to subsistence chum salmon fishing.

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 freshwater fishing periods may be reduced or suspended, until concerns over chum salmon harvests are mitigated. 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.

The only sockeye salmon escapement goal in Subdistrict 1 is in Glacial Lake (800–1,600 fish). Escapement goal was met in 2025 based on a peak aerial survey that recorded 960 sockeye on spawning grounds.

Commercial fishing periods may be provided in Subdistrict 1 for chum, pink, and coho salmon. Those will be based on the most up-to-date escapement and assessment information. Chum and coho salmon will have gillnets restricted to 6 inches and 4 ½ inches for pink salmon if there is market interest.

GOLOVIN SUBDISTRICT

NSEDC plans to operate the Niukluk River counting tower in 2026. The tower project was operational from 1995–2012, and the project was revived at a new location in 2022. 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 the Golovin Subdistrict.

Commercial fishing may occur for chum, pink, and coho salmon. Chum salmon commercial fishing periods are likely to be limited in time and begin in late June with chum salmon fishing opportunity after mid-July dependent on chum salmon escapement. Additionally, the department will evaluate catch per unit of effort (CPUE) from potential commercial openings and harvest rates will be compared with historical commercial harvest rates during similar times to determine if additional fishing is warranted. Pink salmon commercial fishing periods are expected to occur in July dependent on market interest, and coho salmon commercial fishing periods are expected to begin in late July. Until mid-August, coho commercial CPUE will be used to set commercial coho salmon fishing openings. 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. Any directed fishing periods for chum and coho salmon will have gillnets restricted to 6 inches maximum mesh size and 4½ inches maximum mesh size for pink salmon if there is market interest.

Subsistence permits are required when subsistence salmon fishing in the Golovin Subdistrict and no subsistence restrictions are expected.

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 2026 based on a harvestable surplus of chum salmon being observed 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. Commercial fishing for pink salmon is expected if there is market interest.

Commercial coho salmon openings will likely begin in late July with near average run strength expected. Directed fishing periods for chum and coho salmon will have gillnets restricted to 6-inch maximum mesh size and 4 ½-inch maximum mesh size for pink salmon directed fishing periods.

NORTON BAY SUBDISTRICT

Commercial salmon fishing harvest and effort are expected to be low in 2026 based on recent patterns of fisheries participation in Norton Bay.

NSEDC plans to have a counting tower on Ungalik River for the eighth consecutive year and the department plans to use salmon escapement counts from the project as an index of abundance in Subdistrict 4 (Norton Bay) in 2026.

No restrictions on subsistence fishing are expected this year.

SHAKTOOLIK AND UNALAKLEET SUBDISTRICTS

Subdistricts 5 (Shaktoolik) and 6 (Unalakleet) are managed together because studies have indicated salmon bound for these subdistricts intermingle in marine waters. No targeted commercial fishing is anticipated for Chinook and only limited directed chum salmon fisheries may occur. Pink salmon may be targeted commercially; however, no market interest is expected. Commercial gillnet fishing openings are not expected to occur prior to the

beginning of July unless escapement data and subsistence reports indicate there is a harvestable surplus for commercial exploitation.

Abundance of Chinook salmon will be monitored using passage estimates from the counting tower on the North River. 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 minimum of 1,900 Chinook salmon past the North River tower.

Beginning June 15, 2026, in the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts, subsistence fishing will close in the marine and freshwaters to provide conservation of Chinook salmon returning to those subdistricts. The department is not planning to offer weekly subsistence opportunity in marine waters in June and may open subsistence in July with time and net restrictions beyond the schedule listed in regulation. The department will relax the restrictions if inseason indications point to Chinook salmon having an adequate abundance to meet escapement objectives. The department may relax restrictions in mid-July after Chinook salmon have migrated through the area or if escapements are adequate to allow for harvest. Additionally, beach seining may be permitted starting in July in fresh waters with non-retention of Chinook salmon.

Commercial fishing may occur in the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts starting in July and will be dependent on current escapement projections for Chinook and chum salmon. Coho salmon commercial fishing is expected to begin in late July or early August and the run is expected to be below average to average. Management for coho salmon generally begins on July 25, or when coho salmon catches exceed chum salmon catches if there are chum salmon commercial opportunities. Coho gear will be restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches. The initial periods will likely be 24 hours in length and if there is no abundance or capacity concerns, then regular 48-hour fishing periods may follow.

ST. MICHAEL AND STEBBINS

Subsistence fishing will be open 7 days per week in southern Norton Sound from Pt. Romanof to Black Point. Regulation does allow for gillnet mesh size restrictions 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.

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.

In 2025, returns of sockeye salmon to the Pilgrim River met the escapement goal (6,800-36,000 fish) for the second consecutive season. Returns in 2026 are expected to meet the escapement goal and subsistence fishing in the Pilgrim River will start on June 15 with a household limit of 25 sockeye salmon per household. Port Clarence will not have subsistence restrictions in place for the 2026 season. The department may further restrict subsistence fishing if the Pilgrim River sockeye salmon escapement projection is likely to be below the lower end of the escapement goal, or conversely, the department may relax household limits if sockeye salmon escapement indicates a surplus of sockeye salmon above escapement needs exists.

Table 1.—Commercial catch by salmon species, Norton Sound District, 1961–2024.

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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Year	Chinook	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
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	1,557	7,203	139,914	77,016	158,474	384,164
2020	986	2,062	14,689	7,919	26,379	52,035
2021 ^a	15	473	7,189	289,912	6,410	303,999
2022 ^a	29	1,288	13,494	84,324	31,351	130,486
2023 ^a	21	741	9,872	4,260	20,701	35,595
2024 ^a	15	319	13,812	3,242	4,264	21,652
2025 ^a	10	724	31,545	53	5,979	38,311
Avg 2020–24	213	977	11,811	77,931	17,821	108,753
Avg 2015–24	568	2,569	90,775	79,929	84,775	258,616

Note: Harvest numbers may include 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 Chinook/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.

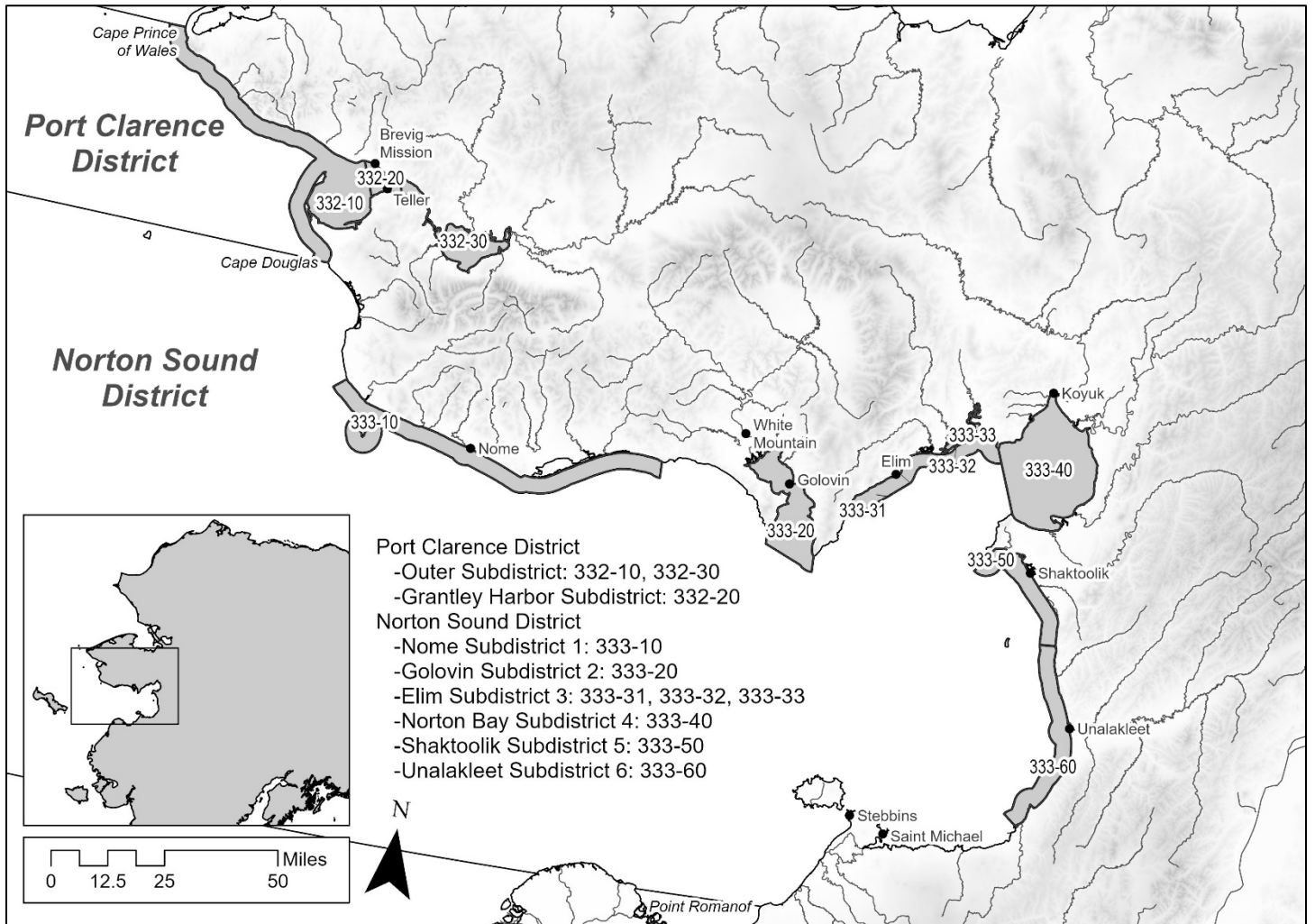


Figure 1.—Statistical areas of the Norton Sound–Port Clarence District.