

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

NEWS RELEASE



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2015 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery Update #1

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) works cooperatively with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and various Tribal or Community groups to monitor the health of Kuskokwim Area salmon stocks and provide data for inseason management.

The following salmon assessment projects will operate in 2015:

Kuskokwim River

- Chinook Salmon Tagging
- Bethel Test Fishery
- Inseason Subsistence Harvest Monitoring
- Lower Kuskokwim River Subsistence Chinook Age, Sex, Length Sampling
- Aniak Test Fishery
- Kwethluk River Weir
- Tuluksak River Weir
- Salmon (Aniak) River Weir
- George River Weir
- Tatlawiksuk River Weir
- Kogrukluk River Weir
- Telaquana Lake Weir (Stony River drainage)
- Salmon River (Pitka Fork) Weir
- Chinook Salmon Aerial Surveys

Kuskokwim Bay

- Kanektok River Weir (District 4)
- Goodnews River Weir (District 5)
- Chinook Salmon Aerial Surveys
- Sockeye Salmon Aerial Surveys

ADF&G ensures that all assessment data are publicly available inseason. Detailed project summaries are prepared each week and presented to the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group. Management meeting are held each Wednesday at the ADF&G office in Bethel. Working Group meetings are open to the public in person or via teleconference. Project summaries and associated meeting materials are available online by 5:00 PM Tuesday during the salmon season. In addition, select data are available daily by 10:00 AM.

Working Group Information Packets:

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareakuskokwim.kswg>

Inseason Bethel Test Fish and Escapement Monitoring Data:

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareakuskokwim.salmon#fishcounts>

Chinook Salmon Tagging

ADF&G is tagging Chinook salmon downstream of Bethel near Fowler Island. The purpose of this study is to estimate the total number of Chinook salmon that return to the Kuskokwim River in 2015 and monitor the migration timing and speed of fish as they travel through the primary harvest areas towards their spawning grounds. Abundance estimation will be completed post season. Migration timing will be assessed inseason and preliminary results presented weekly.

Adult Chinook salmon are captured with 7.5" drift gillnets, tagged with radio and external tags, and released alive. We hope to tag approximately 500–800 fish. Tagged fish will be recaptured at 7 weirs located on key spawning tributaries. Tagged fish are tracked throughout the drainage using aerial surveys and 19 tracking towers located between Bethel and McGrath. USFWS will fly aerial tracking surveys on the Kwethluk, Kisaralik, and Tuluksak rivers three days per week throughout June and July. ADF&G will fly surveys every two weeks focused on a broad geographic area.

ADF&G is conducting a Salmon Tag Lottery. Tagged fish are identifiable by a brightly colored plastic tag attached to their back, and a metal antennae coming out of their mouth. **It is okay if you harvest one of these tagged fish.** If you do, please call 1-800-267-2404 and return the radio tag to the ADF&G office in Bethel. In appreciation, you will be entered into the monthly Lottery and eligible for a cash prize of \$200 and a seasonal cash prize of \$500.

Since May 28th, ADF&G has tagged and released 99 Chinook salmon. At this time only limited tracking data is available through USFWS aerial surveys. Tagged fish have been detected as far upstream as Akiak. The first significant tracking event will occur the week of June 8th.

Bethel Test Fishery

Bethel Test Fishery is the primary inseason run assessment tool for Kuskokwim River salmon and is operated the same way each year. The project calculates a tidal and daily Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) by drifting 5 3/8" mesh and 8" mesh gillnets at multiple stations for up to 20 minutes. The daily CPUE is used to index run timing and relative abundance of Chinook, chum, sockeye, and coho salmon. The data has only limited utility for estimating total run size or escapement. **The 2015 data is not directly comparable to prior years due to subsistence harvest restrictions.**

Bethel Test Fishery was started on May 25th – six days ahead of schedule. The first Chinook salmon was caught on May 25th. The first chum was caught on May 31st. Official drifts began on June 1st. The cumulative CPUE as of June 8th is 59 Chinook salmon, 16 chum salmon, and 3 sockeye salmon.

It is still early in the run for all species. Since 1984, the portion of the total annual run past Bethel by June 8th has averaged 6% for Chinook salmon and less than 1% for sockeye and chum salmon. The peak of the Chinook salmon run is anticipated around June 22nd. The peak of sockeye and chum salmon runs are typically the last week of June and first week of July respectively.

Inseason Subsistence Harvest Monitoring

Orutsararmiut Native Council (ONC) in coordination with ADF&G collect subsistence fishing reports from Bethel area fish camps in an attempt to understand salmon harvest timing and success. ONC staff visit area fish camps each week during the salmon season, share fisheries updates, and answer questions about research and management. In addition, this project provides an opportunity for subsistence fishermen to share information and feedback with managers.

Lower Kuskokwim River Chinook Age, Sex, Length Sampling

Since 2001, ADF&G and ONC have partnered to recruit lower river residents to sample age, sex, and length (ASL) from Chinook salmon harvested for subsistence. Sampling is easy, you get paid for your time, all information is confidential, and you get to keep your fish.

Recruitment is done through a variety of ways. ONC staff recruits participants from the Bethel area during weekly fish camp visits. In 2015, ONC is also encouraging community designated fishermen who are participating in the USFWS Chinook salmon subsistence permit program to collect ASL samples. ADF&G recruits from outside the Bethel area by mailing notices and information material to community Tribal Councils. ADF&G also hosts sampling training workshops. The first workshop was held in Bethel on June 6th and another on June 9th. If you would like to participate in this program, contact Zachary Liller with ADF&G (907)-717-3419 or Dustin Wagner with ONC (907)-543-0523.

Aniak Test Fishery

The Aniak Test Fishery is operated cooperatively by the Native Village of Napaimute (NVN) and ADF&G. The test fishery will operate until approximately July 15 to assist with management of Chinook salmon fisheries in State waters upriver from the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge boundary. The project calculates a morning, evening, and daily CPUE by drifting 6" mesh gillnets at three stations for up to 10 minutes. The daily CPUE is used to index

run timing of Chinook salmon and evaluate the ratio of Chinook salmon to chum and sockeye salmon. **The 2015 data is not directly comparable to CPUE observed at the Bethel Test Fishery.**

The 2015 season is the first time a test fishery has operated in the middle Kuskokwim River in many years. A test fishery was operated in Aniak from 1992 until 1995 by the commercial industry interested in salmon fisheries in District 2. Data from the 2015 season is not comparable to these prior years due to changes in methodology.

As of June 8th, the Aniak Test Fishery has caught 11 Chinook salmon and 2 chum salmon. No sockeye salmon have been harvested. Cumulative CPUE is 98 Chinook salmon and 18 chum salmon. The CPUE indicates the run is still building in the Aniak area and Chinook salmon are more abundant than chum salmon.

Tributary Escapement Monitoring – Weirs

Weirs will be installed on 8 tributaries throughout Kuskokwim River and 2 tributaries in Kuskokwim Bay. Weirs provide the most complete and accurate assessment of escapement to important spawning tributaries. Information from weirs is used as an index of escapement to broader geographic areas. Weirs operated on the Kwethluk and Tuluksak rivers are used to index escapement to the lower Kuskokwim River. The Salmon (Aniak) River weir is used to index the Aniak River drainage. The Kogrukluk River weir is used to index the Holitna River drainage. The George and Tatlawiksuk River weirs index portions of the Middle Kuskokwim River. The Salmon River (Pitka Fork) weir indexes the headwaters. The Telaquana Lake weir indexes escapement for lake-spawning sockeye salmon. Kanektok and Goodnews River weirs index escapement to Districts 4 and 5 respectively in Kuskokwim Bay.

Weirs are installed throughout the month of June and early July. As of June 8th, only the Kwethluk and Salmon River (Pitka Fork) weirs have been installed. Agency staff is currently working to install the remaining weirs. We anticipate the Tuluksak, Salmon, George, and Tatlawiksuk River weirs to be installed by June 15th. Kuskokwim Bay weirs will be installed by June 25th. Kogrukluk River weir will be installed by June 26th. Telaquana Lake weir will be installed by July 3rd.

Tributary Escapement Monitoring – Aerial Surveys

Aerial surveys are flown throughout 15 Kuskokwim River tributaries for Chinook salmon and 3 Kuskokwim Bay tributaries for Chinook salmon and sockeye salmon. Aerial surveys are an index of escapement to a very broad geographic area – meaning not all fish are counted, but the number of fish observed is related to the number of fish that escaped. Aerial surveys will be flown between July 17th and August 5th starting with headwater tributaries and ending in the lower Kuskokwim River and Bay.

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