ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES
NEWS RELEASE

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2015 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery Update #2

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.

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.

As of June 15, ADF&G has caught 346 Chinook salmon of which 271 have been radio tagged. Daily catches at the tag site have increased considerably over the past week, which suggests the run is building in the lower river. Radio tagged fish are being monitored as they migrate upriver using aerial surveys and tracking towers located between Bethel and McGrath. Most of the

tagged fish are still migrating through the lower portion of the Kuskokwim River downriver from the community of Tuluksak. Fish tagged during the first week of June are just now starting to show up in the middle portion of the Kuskokwim River between Kalskag and Chuathbaluk. Tagged fish are traveling on average 18.5 miles per day. The first considerable tracking effort upriver from Chuathbaluk will occur during the week of June 22.

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 1-800-267-2104 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. So far, 16 tagged fish have been reported harvested in the subsistence fishery. Thank you to all who reported catching a tagged fish – you have been entered into the June Lottery.

Bethel Test Fishery

Bethel Test Fishery (BTF) is the primary inseason run assessment tool for Kuskokwim River salmon and is operated the same way each year. The daily Catch Per Unit Effort (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*.

As of June 15, the cumulative CPUE for Chinook salmon is 164. The CPUE is above the 5 and 10-yr average for this date, but well below the cumulative CPUE observed in 2014 which was a weak run. Since 1984, the portion of the total annual run past Bethel by June 15 has averaged 22%. On average, the peak of Chinook salmon run occurs on June 22.

BTF data indicates that conservation of Chinook salmon is still warranted. Chinook salmon are still the most abundant species in the river at this time, as evidenced by the ratio of Chinook salmon to other species in the test fishery. There is considerable uncertainty regarding the 2015 run timing and abundance of Chinook salmon. Management actions in 2015 have restricted harvest during the early portion of the Chinook salmon run for conservation to achieve drainage and tributary escapement goals. Harvest restrictions downriver of the BTF site alters the number and timing of Chinook salmon observed compared to prior years when restrictions were not in place. As a result, the 2015 data is not directly comparable to prior years. BTF catches so far suggest the run is late, weak, or both.

Sockeye and chum salmon are just now starting to show up in the BTF. Cumulative CPUE as of June 15 is 20 sockeye salmon and 35 chum salmon. CPUE for both species are below the 5 and 10-yr averages for this date, but within historical ranges. It is still a very early run for both species. Since 1984, the portion of the total annual run past Bethel by June 15 has averaged only 4% for sockeye salmon and 2% for chum salmon. The 2015 sockeye and chum runs appear to be slightly later than average; however, we should start to see the runs build over the next few days. 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. Project updates will be provided every Wednesday by ONC to the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group.

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. All lower river communities have been notified of this sampling opportunity by phone, mail, and Delta Discovery newspaper. The first sampling workshop was held in Bethel on June 6 and another on June 9. 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 2015 data is not directly comparable to CPUE observed at the Bethel Test Fishery*.

As of June 15, the Aniak Test Fishery has caught 54 Chinook salmon and 8 chum salmon. No sockeye salmon have been harvested. Cumulative CPUE is 452 Chinook salmon and 67 chum salmon. The CPUE indicates the run is still building in the Aniak area and Chinook salmon are more abundant than chum salmon.

Kwethluk and Tuluksak River Weirs

The Kwethluk and Tuluksak River weirs are operated by USFWS and used to index salmon escapement to the lower Kuskokwim River tributaries. Both weirs have been successfully installed.

George, Tatlawiksuk, and Salmon (Pitka Fork) River Weirs

The George and Tatlawiksuk River weirs are operated by ADF&G and the Salmon (Pitka Fork) River weir is operated cooperatively with MTNT (McGrath, Telida, Nikoli, and Takotna). The George and Tatlawiksuk River weirs are used to index salmon escapement to middle Kuskokwim River tributaries. The Salmon Pitka Fork River weir is used to index salmon escapement to the headwaters of the Kuskokwim River. All three weirs have been successfully installed. As of June 15, no salmon have been observed.

Salmon (Aniak) and Kogrukluk River Weirs

The Salmon (Aniak) and Kogrukluk River weirs are operated by ADF&G. The Salmon and Kogrukluk River weirs are used to index salmon escapement to the Aniak River and Holtina Rivers respectively. ADF&G staff will be installing these weirs over the next week. We anticipate both weirs will be operational by June 26.

Telaquana Lake Weir

The Telaquana Lake weir is operated cooperatively by ADF&G and National Park Service. The weir is used to index escapement for lake-spawning sockeye salmon. Staff will begin installing the weir over the next week. We anticipate the weir will be operational by July 3.

Kuskokwim Bay Weirs

The Kanektok and Goodnews River weirs are operated by ADF&G and used to index escapement to Districts 4 and 5 respectively in Kuskokwim Bay. Staff will begin installing the weir over the next week. We anticipate the weir will be operational by June 25.

Kuskokwim River Sonar Feasibility

ADF&G is assessing the feasibility of operating sonar on the mainstem Kuskokwim River to count the total number of salmon by species. If the project proves viable, it could provide daily counts of salmon and greatly strengthen inseason management capabilities.

The feasibility efforts began in 2014 and are continuing in 2015. To date, two potential sites have been identified. One is located near the upper confluence of the Kuskokwim River and Church Slough. The other is located downriver from the community of Akiak. Both sites have good bottom profiles, consistent currents, and few snags. ADF&G staff will be testing sonar equipment and drift fishing at both sites throughout June and early July. All harvested fish will be donated to local communities.

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 17 and August 5 starting with headwater tributaries and ending in the lower Kuskokwim River and Bay.

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