

# ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

## DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

### NEWS RELEASE



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### **2015 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery Update #3**

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 meetings 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>

### **Assessment Overview**

The 2015 Chinook salmon forecast is 96,000–163,000 fish. A run size within this range is well below the historical average of 240,000 fish. A run size near the lower end of the forecast range would be one of the lowest run sizes on record. As a result substantial fishing restrictions have been enacted to conserve Chinook salmon and provide for drainage-wide and tributary escapement goals. ADF&G has determined that a drainage-wide escapement of 65,000–120,000 Chinook salmon is needed to ensure the long-term health of Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon, sustain the subsistence fishery, and provide opportunity for other sources of harvest.

The Chinook salmon run is beginning to wane in the lower portion of the Kuskokwim River and is progressing upriver. Bethel Test Fishery and Lower River Tagging projects indicate that the

peak of the Chinook salmon run has passed the Bethel Area. Telemetry tracking data and Aniak Test Fishery confirm that the peak of the Chinook salmon run is likely passing upriver of Aniak, and the early part of the Chinook salmon run is now approaching headwaters communities. Mounting evidence suggests that the 2015 Chinook salmon run was early and weak. Inseason assessment data has only limited utility for estimating total run size; however, our best estimate is that the run will be near the lower bound of the forecasted range. As a result, conservation measures are warranted. It is too early to determine the effects of the conservation measures on drainage-wide escapement. However, weir projects and telemetry data indicate that Chinook salmon are migrating into spawning tributaries, and escapement observations to date are encouraging.

Chum and sockeye salmon abundance has exceeded Chinook salmon throughout much of the lower and middle portions of the Kuskokwim River, although the observed ratios are low for this time of year. The chum and sockeye salmon runs appear to be late, weak, or both. Sockeye salmon catches in the Bethel Test Fishery have picked up in recent days, while chum salmon catches have remained well below average. Cumulative Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) for chum salmon is approximately 70% less than what was observed at this time in 2014, which was perceived to be a weak run. Bethel Test Fishery indicates that chum salmon abundance may be very weak and conservation measures are warranted to achieve established escapement goals on the Kogrukluuk River.

### **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 29, ADF&G has caught 928 Chinook salmon of which 515 have been radiotagged. Peak daily catches ranging from 60–80 fish per day were observed at the tag site between June 17 and June 20. Since that time, daily catches have declined slowly to 30–40 Chinook salmon per day. Our best estimate is that 85%–95% of the Chinook salmon run has passed the tag site. We expect daily catches to decline over the coming weeks as the final portion of the Chinook salmon run passes through the lower river.

Radio tagged fish are being monitored as they migrate upriver using aerial surveys and tracking towers located between Bethel and McGrath. On average, tagged fish are swimming 22.5 miles per day, and fish tagged later in the season are swimming faster than fish that were tagged at the beginning of the run. Tagged fish continue to move upriver towards their spawning grounds. Approximately 72% of the tagged fish are upriver from Tuluksak, 47% are upriver from Chuathbaluk, 19% are upriver from Sleetmute, and 3% are upriver from McGrath. Of the tagged fish located downriver of Tuluksak, 31% have been detected in the Kwethluk and Kisaralik Rivers combined.

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, 47 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 fishing restrictions. The Bethel Test Fishery continues to operate on schedule.

Chinook salmon cumulative CPUE as of June 29 is 405. The cumulative CPUE is below the 10-yr average for this date. The cumulative CPUE is above the recent 5-yr average; however, those years include some of the lowest run sizes on record. It appears that the Chinook salmon run was early compared to past years, and our best estimate is that 80%–90% of the run has passed the test site. We expect BTF catches of Chinook salmon to decline over the coming weeks as the final portion of the run passes through the Bethel area.

Sockeye salmon cumulative CPUE as of June 29 is 500. The cumulative CPUE is below the 5 and 10-yr averages for this date. The sockeye salmon run continues to build in the Bethel area with increased catches observed over the past few days. The historical mid-point of the sockeye salmon run is June 28. On average 56% of the sockeye salmon run has passed Bethel as of June 29. However, the 2015 run appears to be late, weak, or both. Late run timing would suggest that 25%–45% of the sockeye salmon run has passed Bethel.

Chum salmon cumulative CPUE as of June 29 is 628. The cumulative CPUE is the third lowest on record for this date and is well below the 5 and 10-yr averages. The historical mid-point of the chum salmon run is July 4. On average 31% of the chum salmon run has passed Bethel, as of June 29. However, the 2015 run appears to be late, weak, or both. Late run timing would suggest that 15%–20% of the chum salmon run has passed Bethel.

### **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 29, the Aniak Test Fishery has caught 272 Chinook salmon, 107 chum salmon, and 19 sockeye salmon. Cumulative CPUE is 2,230 Chinook salmon, 875 chum salmon, and 146 sockeye salmon. Over the past week, the Chinook salmon CPUE has remained relatively high and consistent, indicating the peak of the run is likely passing the Aniak area. Chum and sockeye abundance has been building over the past week. These trends were interrupted on June 28 and June 29 when CPUE for all species declined by approximately 75%. The ratio of chum and

sockeye salmon to Chinook salmon has remained below 3:1, which is low for this time of year based on past fishing efforts by ADF&G downriver from Aniak.

### **Kwethluk River Weir**

The Kwethluk River weir is operated by USFWS and used to index salmon escapement to the lower Kuskokwim River tributaries. As of June 29, 365 Chinook salmon, 439 chum salmon, and 699 sockeye salmon have been counted past the weir. The cumulative escapement for all salmon species is above the recent 10-yr average for this date. It is still very early in the salmon escapement for this location. Sockeye salmon escapement typically peaks in early to mid-July. Chinook salmon escapement typically peaks in mid-July. Chum salmon escapement typically peaks in mid to late-July.

A sustainable escapement goal of 4,100–7,500 Chinook salmon has been established by ADF&G for this river. The escapement goal has not been achieved since 2009.

### **Tuluksak River Weir**

The Tuluksak River weir is operated by USFWS. As of June 29, 43 Chinook salmon, 27 chum salmon, and 1 sockeye salmon have been counted past the weir. It is still very early in the salmon escapement for this location. Chinook salmon escapement typically peaks in mid-July. Chum salmon escapement typically peaks in mid to late-July.

No salmon escapement goals have been established by ADF&G for this river.

### **Salmon River (Aniak River) Weir**

The Salmon River (Aniak) weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to the Aniak River drainage. The weir was successfully installed on June 19. No counts have been performed at this location since June 26 due to staff availability. As of June 26, 2 Chinook salmon and 9 chum salmon have been counted past the weir. Daily operations continued as planned on June 30. It is still very early in the salmon escapement for this location. Chinook salmon and chum salmon escapement typically peaks in mid to late-July. Sockeye salmon typically peak in early August.

No weir-based salmon escapement goals have been established by ADF&G for this river.

### **George River Weir**

The George River weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to middle Kuskokwim River tributaries. The weir was successfully installed on June 15. As of June 29, 290 Chinook salmon and 323 chum salmon have been counted past the weir. The Chinook salmon escapement is above the recent 10-yr average for this date. Chum salmon escapement is near average. It is still very early in the salmon escapement for this location. Chinook salmon typically peak early to mid-July. Chum salmon typically peak in mid-July.

A sustainable escapement goal of 1,800–3,300 Chinook salmon has been established by ADF&G for this river. The escapement goal was achieved in 2014.

### **Tatlawiksuk River Weir**

The Tatlawiksuk River weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to middle Kuskokwim River tributaries. The weir was successfully installed on June 13. As of June 29, 57 Chinook salmon and 185 chum salmon have been counted past the weir. The current cumulative passage counts are similar to prior years at this location. It is still very early in the

salmon escapement for this location. Chinook salmon typically peak early to mid-July. Chum salmon typically peak in mid-July.

No salmon escapement goals have been established by ADF&G for this river.

### **Kogrukluk River Weir**

The Kogrukluk River weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to the Holitna River drainage. The weir was successfully installed on June 21. As of June 29, 38 Chinook salmon and 84 chum salmon were counted past the weir. The current cumulative passage counts are similar to prior years at this location. It is still very early in the salmon escapement for this location. Chinook salmon and chum salmon typically peak mid-July. Sockeye salmon typically peak mid to late-July.

Sustainable escapement goals have been established by ADF&G for Chinook salmon (4,800–8,800), chum salmon (15,000–49,000), sockeye salmon (4,400–17,000), and coho salmon (13,000–28,000). Goals were achieved for all species except Chinook salmon in 2014.

### **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 arrived on site to install the weir on June 18, but was evacuated this past week due to numerous wildfires in the area. Staff will continue installation of the weir as soon as it is safe to do so. In prior years the weir was operational by July 3.

### **Salmon River (Pitka Fork) Weir**

The Salmon River (Pitka Fork) weir is operated by ADF&G and MTNT (McGrath, Takotna, Nikolai, Telida) and used to index Chinook salmon escapement to the headwaters upriver from McGrath. The weir was successfully installed on June 1. The very early installation date was in response to local area residents who reported seeing Chinook salmon historically in early June. The first Chinook salmon passed the weir on June 27. As of June 29, 101 Chinook salmon have passed the weir. No other salmon species have been counted.

### **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. Both weirs were successfully installed and began operations on June 25. As of June 28, 18 Chinook salmon, 51 chum salmon, and 1,374 sockeye salmon have passed the Goodnews River weir. As of June 28, 11 Chinook salmon, 122 chum salmon, and 531 sockeye salmon have passed the Kanektok River weir. It is still very early in the salmon escapement for these locations.

### **Inseason Subsistence Harvest Monitoring**

Orutsarmiut 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.

### **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.

Two potential sonar sites have been identified. One is located near the upper confluence of the Kuskokwim River and Church Slough and the other is located downriver from the community of Akiak. Staff has completed the first full round of feasibility work at the lower site – including testing sonar equipment and drift gillnet fishing, which is necessary to determine what species of fish are being detected by the sonar. All fish harvested were donated to the community of Kwethluk. Over the past week, staff relocated to the upper site near Akiak and has successfully installed multiple types of sonar to determine which technology is most appropriate at that location. Staff has been in contact with the community of Akiak and made arrangements to donate all fish harvested while fishing in this location.

### **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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