

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

NEWS RELEASE



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2015 Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery Update #11

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) works cooperatively with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Park Service, 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

This assessment overview focuses primarily on coho salmon. For additional context regarding Chinook salmon, chum salmon, or sockeye salmon, please see prior assessment updates.

Coho salmon runs were managed conservatively throughout the Kuskokwim Management Area. A conservative approach was warranted due to inseason assessment information that indicated late run timing, below average run strength, and uncertainty in achieving tributary escapement goals. Commercial harvest within the Kuskokwim River was delayed and the number of openers was reduced compared to prior years in order to provide additional opportunity for subsistence harvest of coho salmon.

Active management of the Kuskokwim River coho salmon runs has ended. There are no additional commercial harvest opportunities planned for the Kuskokwim Management Area. The Bethel Test Fishery ended operations on August 24. Throughout the season, the Bethel Test Fishery indicated that the coho salmon run size would be adequate to meet escapement goals, allow for an increased subsistence harvest, and modest commercial harvest.

Coho salmon escapement monitoring will continue throughout the month of September at five Kuskokwim River locations and the Goodnews River in Kuskokwim Bay. Currently, escapement of coho salmon is below average at all locations, except Tatlawiksuk River where escapement is above average. Inseason projections of end of season escapement based on late run timing indicate that the escapement goal will likely be achieved at the Kogrukuk River and may not be achieved at the Kwethluk River.

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. These data have only limited utility for estimating total run size or escapement. *The 2015 Chinook salmon, chum salmon, and sockeye salmon data is not directly comparable to prior years due to subsistence fishing restrictions.* The Bethel Test Fishery ended operations on August 24.

End of season cumulative CPUE was 625 Chinook salmon, 2,943 chum salmon, 2,158 sockeye salmon, and 2,736 coho salmon. Cumulative CPUE is above average for Chinook salmon and sockeye salmon, and below average for chum salmon and coho salmon.

Coho salmon were the only salmon species passing through the lower portion of the Kuskokwim River at the time BTF ended operations on August 24. Historically, 99% of the coho salmon run has passed the BTF site as of August 24. The 2015 coho salmon run was late compared to the historical average run timing. The BTF continued to catch modest numbers of coho salmon over the final week of operations, averaging 75 fish per day. Given the late run timing, we expect additional coho salmon to pass the Bethel area over the next week. End of season CPUE for coho salmon was similar to the recent 5-year average of 3,039, but less than the recent 10-year average of 3,535. In prior years when BTF cumulative CPUE for coho salmon exceeded 2,000, escapement goals at the Kogrukuk and Kwethluk rivers were achieved, amounts necessary for subsistence (27,400–57,600) were met, and modest commercial harvest opportunity was allowed.

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 August 25, a total of 8,150 Chinook salmon, 22,911 chum salmon, 8,917 sockeye salmon, and 6,462 coho salmon have been counted past the weir. Reduced daily passage of Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon over the past week indicate escapement of those species is effectively over.

On average, the midpoint of the coho salmon escapement is August 26. Cumulative coho salmon escapement to date is the lowest on record for this location. However, daily escapement of coho salmon has increased considerably over the past week. Coho salmon escapement appears to be either late, weak,

or both. ADF&G has established an escapement goal of >19,000 coho salmon past the Kwethluk River weir. Inseason projections currently indicate that the coho salmon escapement goal may not be met.

Tuluksak River Weir

The Tuluksak River weir is operated by USFWS. As of August 25, a total of 671 Chinook salmon, 6,076 chum salmon, 764 sockeye salmon, and 2,980 coho salmon have been counted past the weir. Reduced daily passage of Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon over the past week indicate escapement of those species is effectively over. On average, the midpoint of the coho salmon escapement is August 26. Cumulative escapement of coho salmon is currently below average for this location.

George River Weir

The George River weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to middle Kuskokwim River tributaries. As of August 25, a total of 2,277 Chinook salmon, 17,218 chum salmon, and 3,812 coho salmon have been counted past the weir. Reduced daily passage of Chinook salmon and chum salmon over the past week indicate escapement of those species is effectively over. On average, the midpoint of the coho salmon escapement is August 28. Cumulative escapement of coho salmon is currently below average for this location.

Tatlawiksuk River Weir

The Tatlawiksuk River weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to middle Kuskokwim River tributaries. As of August 25, a total of 2,094 Chinook salmon, 9,982 chum salmon, and 9,249 coho salmon have been counted past the weir. Reduced daily passage of Chinook salmon and chum salmon over the past week indicate escapement of those species is effectively over. On average, the midpoint of the coho salmon escapement is August 23. Cumulative escapement of coho salmon is currently above average for this location.

Kogrukluk River Weir

The Kogrukluk River weir is operated by ADF&G and used to index salmon escapement to the Holitna River drainage. As of August 25, a total of 7,627 Chinook salmon, 31,451 chum salmon, 6,338 sockeye salmon, and 3,014 coho salmon were counted past the weir. Reduced daily passage of Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon over the past week indicate escapement of those species is effectively over.

On average, the midpoint of the coho salmon escapement is September 1. Cumulative coho salmon escapement to date is one of the lowest on record for this location. Coho salmon escapement appears to be either late, weak, or both. ADF&G has established an escapement goal of 13,000–28,000 coho salmon past the Kogrukluk River weir. Inseason projections of end of season escapement are currently inconclusive. However, projections based on late run timing scenarios indicate that the coho salmon escapement goal may be met.

Middle Fork Goodnews River weir

The Middle Fork Goodnews River weir is used to monitor escapement to District 5 in Kuskokwim Bay. As of August 25, total passage through the weir is 1,394 Chinook, 54,322 sockeye, 10,819 chum, and 588 coho salmon. Reduced daily passage of Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon over the past week indicate

escapement of those species is effectively over. On average, the midpoint of the coho salmon escapement is August 31. Cumulative escapement of coho salmon is currently the lowest on record for this location.

Commercial Harvest

There are no additional commercial harvest opportunities planned for the Kuskokwim Management Area.

There have been a total of three commercial openers in District W1, downriver from Bethel. The first commercial opener was August 10. Total harvest from those three periods was 5 Chinook, 129 sockeye, 514 chum, and 64,994 coho salmon. Total harvest of all species is below average.

There have been a total of 17 commercial openers in District W4. The first commercial opener was July 3. Total harvest is 7,533 Chinook, 16,139 chum, 30,272 sockeye, and 75,264 coho salmon. Harvest is below average for Chinook salmon, chum salmon, and sockeye salmon. Coho salmon harvest is above average.

There have been a total of 13 commercial openers in District W5. The first commercial opener was July 3. Total harvest is 705 Chinook, 4,510 chum, 25,861 sockeye, and 7,030 coho salmon. Harvest is below average for all species.

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