RC 016

February 27, 2014

Alaska Board of Fisheries
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Boards Support Section

Dear Chairman Johnstone,

The Kuskokwim Salmon Management Working Group would like the Board of Fisheries to consider two Emergency Petitions, which are enclosed, at the upcoming Board of Fisheries Meeting.

Sincerely,

Dave Cannon

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Chairman Karl Johnstone
Alaska Board of Fisheries
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Boards Support Section
P.O. Box 115526
Juneau, AK
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Dear Chairman Johnstone:

The purpose of this letter is to request that the Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) consider an emergency petition to add dip nets as legal gear for the taking of salmon other than king salmon in the Kuskokwim Area during times of king salmon conservation. Currently, the regulations only allow for the use of gillnets, fish wheels, beach seines, and hook and line attached to a rod or pole.

Section 5AAC 07.365(2)(a) of the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Plan states in: In addition to the gear specifications and operations provisions of 5 AAC 01.270(n), when the commissioner determines that it is necessary for the conservation of king salmon, the commissioner may, by emergency order, close the subsistence fishery and immediately reopen the fishery during which gillnet mesh size may not exceed four inches until sockeye and chum abundance exceeds the king salmon abundance;

The Kuskokwim Salmon Management Working Group (Working Group) is requesting that the use of dip nets be allowed during this critical period when king salmon numbers are at an all-time low. As part of this request, we would like to see the following provision included in a regulation allowing the use of dip nets – "all king salmon caught with a dip net must be released alive to the water."

We believe that an emergency action by the Board of Fisheries is warranted in accordance with AS AAC 96.625, which states:

> In this section, an emergency is an unforeseen, unexpected event that either threatens a fish or game resource, or an unforeseen, unexpected resource situation where a **biologically allowable resource harvest would be precluded by delayed regulatory action and such delay would be significantly burdensome to the petitioners because the resource would be unavailable in the future**.

The Working Group justifies this request for emergency action based on our conviction that an emergency exists pertaining to both resource conservation and to food security for local residents:

1. First and foremost, 5AAC 07.365 – The Kuskokwim Salmon Management Plan states: *(a) The purpose of this management plan is to provide guidelines for management of the Kuskokwim salmon fisheries that result in the sustained yield of salmon stocks large enough to meet escapement goals, amounts reasonably necessary for subsistence uses,*

and for nonsubsistence fisheries. Unfortunately, these objectives have not been attained in recent years.

2. In 2013 all seven of the Kuskokwim's salmon enumeration projects observed the lowest king salmon escapements on record, resulting in a failure to meet the drainagewide escapement goal (Figure 1). A new drainagewide escapement goal of 65,000 to 120,000 king salmon was adopted in 2013. For the second time in the past four years, escapements on the Kuskokwim fell below this mark.
3. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game's (department) preseason forecast for 2013 was for between 160,000-240,000 king salmon, however, the department's preliminary run reconstruction estimate for the entire river was only 94,000 king salmon. Of these, roughly 46,000 were harvested by subsistence fishermen, allowing only about 47,000 to escape to the spawning grounds. Subsequently, the 2013 escapement was the lowest on record, dipping below the 2010 estimate of 49,000.
4. The 2012 preseason forecast was also imprecise and in November and December of 2013, the department reassessed the accuracy of the many preseason modeling tools. The department concluded that management for the upcoming year (i.e., 2014) could be better informed based on the outcome from the prior year. Consequently, the 2014 preseason forecast range is projected to be in the ballpark of 70,000-117,000 (i.e., ± 25% of 94,000).
5. The annual king salmon subsistence harvest for the entire Kuskokwim drainage often exceeds 80,000. Considering that the upper bound of the 2014 forecast is 117,000 - that would leave a harvestable surplus of 52,000 above escapement needs. This is well below the average harvest of king salmon among Kuskokwim River communities and would be burdensome to many residents in regards to food security.
6. If the return comes in closer to the lower bound of the forecast (i.e., 70,000), there would be no more than 5,000 fish available for harvest (based on the lower bound of 65,000). This represents a potential 94% reduction in the subsistence king salmon fishery. Given that in some years roughly 2,500 subsistence households participate in the fishery - if resources could be equitably distributed - that would leave only two king salmon per household! And that 5,000 fish "surplus" could potentially be harvested in the 4-inch whitefish nets at the beginning of the season, depending on how many nets are deployed. As in past years, the vast majority of that harvest would occur in the lower river; therefore, it's very unlikely that such a scant surplus could be distributed equitably.
7. Significant restrictions during 2012 resulted in a subsistence harvest of only 22,000 kings; the restrictions included 288 hours of total closure during the mid-part of the season and 216 hours where only 6" mesh or less nets were allowed toward the end of the season. This reduction did result in an escapement consistent with the newly established 2013 drainagewide goal. In 2013 a mesh size restriction of 6" or less was implemented during the later part of the season that contributed to a harvest estimated at 46,000 - twice as many as in 2012; but unlike 2012, the escapement goal was not achieved. Unfortunately, there was a substantial disparity among fishers' success in 2013. The lower river residents, although still below their average harvest levels, did manage to put away a considerable amount of kings; the middle and upriver residents, however, were unable to meet their needs.
8. In 2013 the in-season assessment tools proved inadequate to accurately assess the run strength much of the season, so it is unrealistic to expect in 2014 that they could detect

or track the removal of the potential 5,000 fish surplus during the early part of the run. This alone could endanger the possibility of attaining escapement if the run is at the low end of the forecast.

All indications point to a need for restrictions in 2014, even more restrictive than what were imposed in 2012; that year residents experienced the most severe limits ever enacted on the Kuskokwim River. Figure 2 shows one possible schedule proposed by the department allowing very limited opportunity in June and July. Regardless of what restriction are in place, and given the likely limited surplus expected, it's very unlikely that subsistence fishers will be allowed one opening per week as spelled out in the Management Plan (5 AAC 07.365).

If the king salmon run in the Kuskokwim River continues to decline, it is possible and downright frightening, that no harvestable surplus would be available from the get go. As noted, restrictions are almost a certainty. No one wants to repeat last year's scenario of the disparity among fishers' ability to harvest king salmon and the non-attainment of escapement. Limiting the customary methods of fishing that most Kuskokwim residents employ for extended time periods would certainly hinder fishers' ability and opportunity to fulfill their subsistence fisheries needs. Depending on the king salmon conservation measures executed, it is possible that they would interfere with the ability of fishers to harvest other abundant salmon species like chum or sockeye salmon.

The addition of dip nets as a gear option could broaden fishers' opportunity to provide for their families by allowing subsistence activities to proceed without severely impacting the king run. If the Board were to accept this emergency petition, it would provide one more method that could allow fishers an opportunity to attempt to supplement their normal subsistence harvest by catching chum and sockeye salmon.

The Kuskokwim Salmon Management Working Group fully understands that the allowance of dip nets is not the solution to the impending food security dilemma for several reasons: 1) this is a new method and very few residents own a dip net at this time and 2) It will take time for people to learn how and where to use a dip net effectively. However, dip nets, if applied successfully, can help mitigate the impact of king conservation measures on food security for at least some Kuskokwim subsistence users.

Figure 1. Kuskokwim Weir Project King Counts 2003 - 2013

	Chinook Salmon Escapement						
Year	Kwethluk	Tuluksak	George	Kogrukluk	Tatlawiksuk	Takotna	Salmon
2003	14,474	1,064	4,693	11,771	1,683	378	[a]
2004	28,605	1,475	5,207	19,651	2,833	461	[a]
2005	[a]	2,653	3,845	22,000	2,918	499	[a]
2006	17,619	1,043	4,357	19,414	1,700	539	[a]
2007	13,267	374	4,883	13,029	2,061	418	6,220
2008	5,312	701	2,698	9,730	1,071	413	2,376
2009	5,710	362	3,663	9,702	1,071	311	[a]
2010	1,693	201	1,500	5,690	567	178	[a]
2011	4,079	288	1,571	6,891	1,012	134	[a]
2012	[a]	560	2,302	[a]	1,116	228	[a]
2013[b]	[a]	193	1,158	1,713	495	94	598
SEG	4,100-7,500		1,800-3,300	4,800-8,800			
Average 2003–2012	11,345	872	3,472	13,098	1,603	356	4,298

[a] Weir did not operate or counts were incomplete.

[b] Preliminary numbers subject to change.
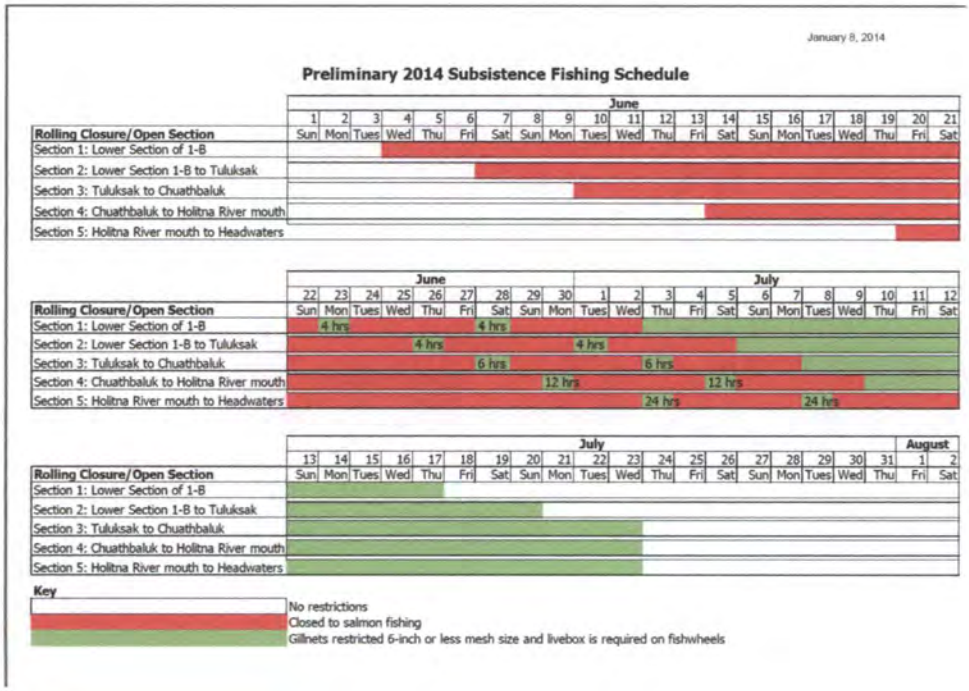
Figure 2. One of the Potential Subsistence Fishing Schedule's Proposed by ADF&G for the 2014 Season.