

Proposal to create a commercial freshwater pike fishery

This was originally submitted as a proposal for this meeting but it was not accepted as it didn't specifically address regulatory action.

The BOF should facilitate the development of a commercial freshwater pike fishery in Northern Cook Inlet drainages. Northern pike are an invasive species in the Cook Inlet basin, yet instead of trying to eradicate them, both the BOF and ADF&G Sport Fish Division, for years, considered them a sport fish, limiting the harvest through the use of closed seasons, gear limits, time limits, slot limits and bag limits. As a result the invasive northern pike proliferated and spread throughout much of the Mat-Su watershed and other drainages. At least 140 different waterways in the northern Cook Inlet region are now infested with pike and the result has been devastating to the salmon populations. Salmon have been extirpated in at least 6 to 8 lake systems by northern pike predation on juvenile salmonids, and overall salmon production in the region has been reduced by about 50 percent. Sockeye, coho and Chinook populations are affected by pike the most as they spend more time in freshwater as compared to pink and chum salmon. Limiting commercial fisheries in saltwater has never killed a single pike, however, a directed commercial freshwater fishery on northern pike would provide immediate and long term benefits.

The Alexander Creek Chinook fishery once supported 9 fishing lodges and over 26,000 angler days per year until the sport fishery was closed in 2008 due to northern pike predation on juvenile salmonids. ADF&G initiated a gillnetting program in Alexander Creek in 2010 and in a recent tally, the program had killed and removed 18,000 pike just from that system. Salmon populations are now starting to increase in Alexander Creek, however, to remain effective this gillnetting project must continue at some level. In addition, this type of effort needs to occur wherever pike are found throughout the northern Cook Inlet region. The Alexander Creek Pike Removal Project has cost well in excess of a million dollars. Due to the current economic circumstance, it is unlikely the State of Alaska will have funding for pike mitigation efforts in the future.

Developing a commercial pike fishery will create an economic incentive (by allowing the sale of harvested pike) for the private sector to accomplish what the ADF&G is unable to do on a large scale – reduce pike populations enough to allow salmon populations to recover.

I would like to see the BOF form a working group or task force with BOF members, ADF&G and interested members of the public to develop an action plan, goals, gear types, methods and regulations for a commercial freshwater pike fishery in northern Cook Inlet drainages.

Erik Huebsch

Kasilof AK