

Steve Merritt committee testimony on proposal 113

Madam Chair board of fish members

I'm Steve Merritt and I live in Craig Alaska. Proposal 113.

The Taku and Stikine river districts are managed, in accordance to **Transboundary river annex** of the Pacific Salmon Treaty.

I created this proposal, because I believe there have been times, in the Stikine districts **6** and **8** gillnet fisheries, in which compliance to this annex was not fully demonstrated. This problem occurs, when there is no conservation **concern** for kings, and yet there is no direct **king** fishery generated by the Transboundary River agreement.

In order for a direct king fishery to be generated, the prediction of the **river king** run, has to almost exceed the spawning goal, entirely.

When the prediction of the run comes in just above the spawning goal **mid-point**, the department does not implement a mesh restriction on the gillnet sockeye fishery.

The agreement requires, that when there is not a direct king fishery generated, the commercial gillnet fisheries that occur in these **districts**, are required to be directed at other species of salmon besides king salmon.

From the department's comments on this proposal.

If the projected king salmon run is within the escapement goal range, but does not provide AC for directed fisheries, the BLC allows for a small incidental harvest of king salmon, while fisheries are directed at sockeye salmon."

When barely above the midpoint, it's impossible, to argue these fisheries are sockeye directed, without a mesh restriction of some sort. With **NO** mesh restriction engaged, it allows king nets to be used, and Fisherman are then directly fishing for spawning king salmon. Since no direct king fishery has been sanctioned, that is outside the parameters of the TBR agreement.

Spawning kings are at an abundance high in the Stikine area during the month of June.. Fisherman are not dumb. If there is 15,000 \$5 to \$10 a pound kings swimming under the boat and even if there is 20,000 \$2.00 a lb sockeye with them, most fishermen are going to throw that king net into the water if allowed. And if you were under the impression from the genetic harvest chart in the department's comments, that only a few kings are being harvested when this situation occurs. That is not the case.

The years 2013, 14 and 15 are the most recent years when there was no direct king fishery allowed and no net restriction on the gillnet fishery. Harvest data, shows that in 2013 in district 8 alone, drift nets caught 10,817 kings, in 2014 it was 8,023 kings, and 2015, 13,845. If a sockeye net was levied during those years, the annual outcome would have sent significantly more spawning kings, to the Stikine river. And that was the intent of the Transboundary river agreement, in the first place. So, this sockeye fishery with no **mesh** restriction, not only defies the intent of the agreement, it also has a devastating impact on the overall king salmon resource, in the area. As well as causing the hatchery allocation percentage of the gillnet fishery to trend upwards..

I intentionally left the mesh size for you to decide because the management plans of the Taku and Stikine are unique to one another. .

The Taku's management plan. Although, has a **sockeye** focus, there **are** limestone hatchery chum goals iterated in this plan, that allow the fishery to target chums alongside sockeye.

A mesh of 6 inches would be the department's ideal choice to fit the Taku plan. In their comments they state. **A six-inch minimum mesh size restriction may be employed to improve the of harvest chum salmon, while conserving sockeye salmon in mixed stock fisheries.** I would recommend a 6-inch mesh choice for the Taku district 11 if you adopt 113. This also will satisfy the treaty annex, ensuring the harvest of Taku kings will be incidental, when no direct king fishery is allowed.

That should also alleviate the department's opposing anxiety about reducing mesh size may unnecessarily restrict opportunity to harvest other stocks of salmon.

The Stikine management plan however is different. It has a sockeye focus only in June. That plan states

Sockeye salmon fishing in both district, will be managed in accordance with the TBR Annex of the PST. The Annex allows District 6, to be managed primarily for local Alaska sockeye salmon stocks. Management of District 8, is based on the harvest of sockeye salmon, of Stikine River origin.

There are no management goals, that specify any other species of salmon, this fishery is to be fishing for in June, **when a** DIRECT king fishery is NOT called for.

The department in this case, shouldn't be too concerned, that a smaller net, would unnecessarily restrict opportunity to harvest other stocks of salmon; Because the only goal in the management plan, is specific to sockeye in the month of June.

So picking a mesh size to fit this areas management plan should be efficient on sockeye. And it Seems, one of the essential tools needed, for a fishery, that is managed strictly based on the harvest of sockeye, is to make sure, the fisherman are using a sockeye net.

That is why I put the option of choosing a smaller mesh than 6 inches in this proposal.

However, if you passed 113 with 6-inch mesh for both the Taku and Stikine districts, it would be far better than what is going on now, as far as the intent of the TBR agreement, is concerned. It would be at least something, that steers this gillnet fishery away from king salmon at times, when it should not be targeting them..

The department has one additional opposing comment I'll address.

'Defining dates, in regulation,, when the mesh size will be implemented, reduces the department's ability to respond to conservation concerns.

This proposal has no specific date of when the mesh size will be implemented, only when it's lifted. And the department can respond to conservation concerns thru the commissioner, by emergency order at any time.. Furthermore, I have found several examples of date specific mesh size implementation currently **in use** today, in Alaska's regulations. If you determine, this is a major issue, then simply change this proposal to read **instead** of Up to July first, to until **the first Sunday in July**. That should remove most if not all the opposition from the department on this proposal.

So in closing. Currently the only mesh restriction the department has the authority to levy, on the gilnet fishery, is one for king salmon conservation purposes. Above the midpoint, they have no concern. This proposal gives the department the needed additional authority or instruction , to impose a mesh restriction, on this fishery, in order to comply with the TBR agreement.

Yes, there are going to be fishermen opposed to this proposal, because they are making serious money fishing sockeye with a king net. But Compliance to the annex should override those objections.

You people are the gate keepers, on fishery management in this state. One of your main responsibilities, is to ensure the department has the appropriate tools, to manage the fisheries, according to the plans, you have approved. Managing a fishery based on the harvest of sockeye, without requiring a sockeye net, seems inadequate and provides an avenue for management disaster.. You also have to make sure, managers have the tools to comply with international agreements, when fisheries warrant it. **In** these TBR districts, there are changes that need to take place, in order for this **drift net** fishery to comply the agreement, at all times, instead of just part of the time. This proposal is your solution to those short falls. Thank you