

PROPOSAL 25

5 ACC 67.022. Special provisions for seasons, bag, possession, and size limits, and methods and means in the Bristol Bay Area.

Reduce king salmon bag and possession limits and prohibit harvest of female king salmon in the Naknek River drainage, as follows:

I recommend dropping the bag limit down to two King Salmon per season, one King Salmon over 28 inches and one King Salmon under 28 inches, MALES ONLY. All females must be released. The current regulation allows for an annual bag limit of 5 king salmon.

The new regulation should read as follows:

(1) king salmon: (A) in fresh waters, as follows: (i) 20 inches or greater in length; may be taken only from May 1 through July 31; bag and possession limit of two [THREE] fish, of which only one fish may be 28 inches or greater in length; annual limit of two [FIVE] fish 20 inches or greater in length taken in combination from fresh waters and salt waters; ONLY MALES MAY BE RETAINED; a harvest record is required as specified in 5 AAC 75.006;

...

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? Due to the urgent and continual decline of King Salmon in the Naknek River Drainage, I propose to adopt a reduced King Salmon bag limit, males only, all females must be released. The current regulation allows for 5 kings to be taken annually; a number that is way too high considering our extremely low returns. Dropping the bag limit and allowing only males to be retained will help safeguard a species that is in dire need of protection.

Background

I have lived in King Salmon my entire life, 36 years, and have spent nearly every summer on the Naknek River, personal fishing and guiding. I grew up guiding and have guided on the river for over 15 years. During that time, I have watched a drastic reduction in the King fishery, to the point that it is a mere remnant of what it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s. I feel that at this point the Kings on the Naknek River will probably never come back to levels they used to be. **Again, it is a remnant fishery, and I would go as far to say that Kings are endangered.** After nearly 15 years of guiding fishermen, primarily for Kings on the Naknek, I gave it up because I could no longer look a paying client in the eye and tell them that the King fishing was good, and promise them a good trip. The run is more or less gone. It is a very sad fate that Kings have suffered. At this point it is so bad that I don't even enjoy fishing with my family for Kings, because there is almost nothing to catch.

During the last two decades, there has been a complete and utter disregard for these amazing fish by both the Department and the Board of Fish. (The in-river commercial fishery in the mouth of the Naknek is a prime example). No efforts have been made to count their numbers, determine the health of the run, limit the level of effort, reduce bag limits, or anything management related what so ever. To me, this is nothing short of a dereliction of the Department's duties. It is a travesty of the highest order and represents a complete and utter failure in management, the likes of which I

can think of no comparison. It is especially sad for me to see the river which I have grown up on, and which I have spend so many days of my life on, and more importantly, the river where so many locals once enjoyed sport fishing kings with their families or catching them for subsistence, to be reduced to this sorry and pathetic state. Will my son and daughter ever see kings the way I saw them when I was young? HIGHLY DOUBTFUL.

It must be at least acknowledged that the commercial fishery in Bristol Bay has not helped the King population. Again, the in-river fishery was a huge mistake in my opinion, but the fact of the matter is that our river is managed for the commercial fishing of red salmon, and red salmon alone. All other fish are an afterthought, or more accurately, not thought of at all. I can say this as a commercial fisherman myself, for the last 6 years. Commercial fishermen catch more than our fair share of kings, that is for sure, even with the in-river fishery days long over. The commercial red salmon fishery, takes a large number of kings each year, which on a river like the Naknek that does not get many kings for their overall run, ends up being a large percentage of the King run taken in nets. I think there are solutions to this that work for both the commercial fishery and for the kings, but I am not going to mention them now, as it is no doubt a much larger topic, and certainly a more controversial one. I simply want to point out that lack of kings is surely not just a sport fishing related cause. However, what I am offering with this proposal, is at the very least a simple and easy to implement “first start” to conserving kings on the Naknek River, one in which most of my fellow sport fishermen in this community would be happy to support. In fact, I have spoken with many people in our community who support this. I am not the only one who is upset about what has happened to our kings, and the lack of action.

Other rivers reduce bag limits on kings, such as the Nushagak. I realize that the Nush has a King management plan, and they count Kings. The Naknek does not. Again, I go back to my previous statement on complete disregard for the kings on the Naknek River by the department. I realize that you will say there is no data available, no surveys, etc etc etc. Whatever excuse you want. Well, that may be true, but who’s fault is that? Should the fish continue to suffer? Should we just ignore them further until there are none left, to the point where even subsistence no longer is an option? Because that is what is happening right before our eyes. Our community members who fish this river year after year know there is a major issue on the Naknek River king salmon run. You may not have the data, but the people who live here know. We see it with our own eyes, year after year steadily getting worse, to the point no one wants to even fish for Kings on this once world-famous king salmon fishing destination. It is sad.

This is a small sacrifice, an easy first step, which will no doubt help. Bag limit reductions will be extremely beneficial. Once in the river, a higher percentage of fish will be able to spawn. Let those fish that manage to run the gauntlet of commercial fishing nets, miraculously making through the web, be free to spawn. Further, by making sport fishermen release all females, more females will be on the spawning beds, which is crucial. I have heard from the department at our AC meeting say that this regulation is “unenforceable, because you can’t distinguish between females and males all the time.” I have heard them actually say that in a study, “40% (or some percentage in this range) of department staff could not tell, so how can the average person tell the difference?” This is an utter joke to me. First off, I have been able to tell a male from a female king since I was a kid. You don’t need a PHD to do so. Second, if you are not sure, let it go. I will point to the many hunting regulations with size restrictions in place, that are certainly much more difficult to judge

than the sex of an adult King. For example, have you ever tried to determine legality of a dall sheep? There are numerous ways for a sheep to be legal, none of which are obvious or easy to tell, all of which are open to interpretation even by biologists, and in fact I would say, as a dall sheep hunting guide myself, are extremely difficult. Yet they are regulations. I would point to the wonderful publication the ADF&G put out on Judging sheep. The same argument can be made for moose, determining spread (50" minimum), or brown tine count. Do not tell me it is hard to tell the difference between male and female kings. Further, they always say when sheep hunting – if you are not sure it is full curl, 8 years old, or broken past the lamb tip on both sides, (the 3 primary ways to determine legality), then DO NOT SHOOT. The same can be said for kings – if you are not sure if it's a male, throw it back. Simple as that. **This is sport fishing. Not subsistence fishing. The idea behind sport fishing is that we are ok releasing fish. It is not done as a way to fill the freezer.**

The enforceability of something should never be the determining factor on whether or not it is put into regulation!

You can tell from my comments that I am very upset by the lack of any action on trying to preserve what remains of our Kings, and I am. I hope the department takes my comments seriously. It is sad what has happened here. You have the power to help make it better. .

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