

A rare summer-long chinook opener was not enough to lure SE trollers away from Chumageddon

Posted by Robert Woolsey, KCAW | Sep 28, 2022



As the summer season came to an end on September 20, Southeast trollers looked likely to reach the 1-million fish mark for chum. The excellent fishing close to Sitka earned the nickname “Chumageddon,” and kept about one-third of the fleet busy near shore, rather than offshore fishing for kings.

(KCAW/Kimi Eisele)

Chinook trollers in Southeast may have left a sizeable portion of their allocation in the water when the summer season wrapped up on September 20 – but that doesn’t mean it was a bad year. Instead, it was a rather unusual year.

If you've lived in Alaska for a while you've probably heard about the short summer king seasons in Southeast – all-out efforts that last anywhere from three days to a week beginning on July 1.

That was not the case this year.

“Being able to retain chinook for the entire summer is not something that they're used to,” said Grant Hagerman, troll management biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish & Game in Sitka.

Right: Commercial trolling for king salmon was open all summer, with only three days off to allow silver salmon – or coho – time to escape into their natal streams, lakes, and rivers.

Hagerman says the long summer season wasn't due to a lack of king salmon; rather, it was an abundance of choice. Commercial trolling has changed.

“Obviously they've diversified and have a number of different species they can target,” he said, “so they can spread effort out between those fishing chinook, those fishing coho, and those fishing enhanced chum salmon.”

“Enhanced” chum – another name for chum salmon reared in a hatchery and released into the wild – completely changed the dynamic of the troll fishery this summer. Trollers caught about 1 million of them, many from a hatchery release site in Deep Inlet, which is just a few minutes' run from Sitka's harbor. Chum have historically sold for around \$.50 a pound, but this year topped out at about \$1.20. That's \$8 million in chum. Kings are worth about five times as much, but there are a lot fewer to be caught – just 150,000 this summer – and the best king fishing is offshore, which takes time, fuel, and decent weather to make happen.

Hagerman says it's no mystery why so many trollers diverted to chum fishing.

“There were about 250 trollers out of a fleet of probably 700 that chose to fish enhanced chums for about five

weeks," he said. "It was basically the end of July and almost all of August, while chinook salmon was open."

As a result, by season's end on September 20, trollers had left about 9,000 of their summer chinook allocation in the water – fish that won't be rolled over into the Winter Troll Fishery which opens on October 11.

In an email to KCAW, Alaska Trollers Association president Matt Donohoe confirmed that the usual mid-season downturn in prices for kings and coho made those species even less attractive, given the high cost of diesel fuel, which he says doubled from 2021(\$2.73) to 2022 (\$5.75). "Trollers fished kings and cohos less in 2022 because, while costs more than doubled, the ex-vessel fish price was significantly reduced," he wrote. "On top of that the weather really sucked."

ADF&G's rationale for not extending the chinook season? Escapement

Biologist Grant Hagerman explains the decision to allow summer trolling to end on schedule, rather than extend it to allow trollers to target their full allocation of chinook.

So at the time of the assessment, we gauge how things are looking on a number of fronts. And we tried to go into that, in the Advisory Announcement on September 15 (five days prior to the end of the season): What the projected harvest is, what catch rates look like, what in-river indicators are for our indicator stocks, that type of thing. Unfortunately, this year at that time of assessment, some of the indicator stocks in river we were projecting as not making escapement, or on the lower end of the escapement goal range. And then, of course, right outside the river mouth you've got the terminal fisheries, you've got the drift gillnet fishery, and those major gillnet fisheries throughout the region, that were average-to-below average in their catch rate. So that was a little bit of a red flag there. The troll catch rates were dropping, there were still some good catches but overall, throughout the region, the catch rates were declining to average to below average. So it (allowing trolling to close on schedule) was just a precautionary measure at that time. Things have changed since we closed the fishery. There have been fish moving to inside waters, the gillnet fisheries have picked up and their

catch rates and in-river indicators look much better. So fortunately those fish did move to the inside. And it looks like things will probably shape up to be just fine. But you know, where we are with coho escapements is very preliminary at this point. A lot of those systems have fish coming in all the way into October-November.

Besides the abundance of fish, another significant factor to consider in evaluating the success of summer trolling is the scarcity of permit holders. Hagerman says that there were about 100 fewer boats trolling in Southeast this summer than the five-year average, and perhaps 200 fewer than the 10-year average. Although it would mean a bigger piece of the pie for trollers who stayed in, the summer's high inflation took a far bigger bite out of a boat's income – called “ex-vessel value” – than anyone anticipated.

“I guess you could look at the ex-vessel values as, I would say, better than average, but what you're not looking at is net values,” Hagerman said. “Obviously, the price of everything is up, groceries and fuel and everything. And though (salmon) prices seem to be pretty good, they're not really higher than what they have been in the last 5-10 years. And so like I said, it hasn't really compensated for that huge increase in fuel price.”

And while it was not a bad season for coho (850,000 harvested, roughly the same as last year), at \$2 a pound it was still difficult for trollers to make ends meet with silvers. Hagerman believes that many trollers just decided to wait for the more attractive economics of chum.

“There were a fair number of permits that stayed tied to the dock until this enhanced chum run started coming through,” he said. “And then boats kind of came out of the woodwork. We had boats from all over Southeast that were here for a month, basically.”

Hagerman says it's too hard to predict whether this is the new normal for Southeast trolling. There have been large runs of hatchery chum in the past, but the price difference between chum and chinook kept the fleet's focus on kings. He hasn't seen many new permits in the

fishery recently, and he hopes that the number of trollers working – though lower than past years – levels out. The future really is anyone’s guess. “As far as a new norm,” he says, “every year is different.”

Note: This story was updated on 9-30-22 to include comments from ATA president Matt Donohoe.

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