

## **PROPOSAL 181**

### **5 AAC 57.121. Special provisions for the seasons, bag, possession, and size limits, and methods and means for the Middle Section of the Kenai River Drainage Area.**

Close waters of the Kenai River to sport fishing from January 1 – June 10 as follows:

Section 5 AAC 57.121

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(2) the following waters are closed to sportfishing as follows;

(K) from **January** [MAY] 1 – June 10, in that portion of the Kenai River from an ADF&G regulatory marker located approximately one mile upstream from the mouth of the Lower Killey River upstream to an ADF&G regulatory marker located at the outlet of Skilak Lake

**What is the issue you would like the board to address and why?** Increased angling pressure on resident species of the Kenai River during winter months.

Due to its locale and accessibility the Kenai River has more angler use days than any other watershed in the State of Alaska. With liberal seasons and ample opportunity throughout the entire year the Kenai River is currently supporting angling pressure twelve months a year. As the population of southcentral Alaska increases recreation on the Kenai River is also increasing. The Board of Fish has provided the ADF&G with salmon management plans, and the tools required to manage such populations with little to no direction being provided by the board regarding the management of resident species. With the continued low abundance of Kenai River King Salmon and the in-river restrictions implemented, many anglers have turned their focus to the targeting of resident species, and in recent years anglers targeting resident species have become the most prevalent user group on the Kenai River, with opportunities to fish twelve months a year. This has resulted in an uptick in popularity and participation of the resident species fishery which currently has extremely liberal seasons. It is my contention that the resident species be given respite in times of low food abundance and the cold weather months.

The angling pressure on the Lower Kenai River downstream of Skilak Lake in the winter months has steadily increased in the past twenty years, exponentially so in the past 5 years. Access via multiple boat launches operated by state, federal, and private landowners provide access to open water during the winter months. During these winter months the water levels in river drop significantly, concentrating fish in areas where food, slower current, and safety from predators can be found. As the water temperatures decrease fish become lethargic, localized, and repetitive in their feeding behavior, resulting in opportunities to target fish that are otherwise difficult to locate and target the remainder of the year. The continued fishing pressure in these areas of concentrated fish during times of subfreezing temperatures and lower abundance of food sources is resulting in many of the same fish being consistently targeted throughout the winter months. Unfortunately, many of the anglers participating in the resident species winter fishery execute the fishery in a manner that is not consistent with catch and release ethics, posing with fish out of the water in subfreezing temperatures or laying fish on snow, ice, or frozen ground to photograph the fish – as observed on multiple social media platforms and websites. The resident species within the State

of Alaska deserve protection equal to that of our salmon populations. If viewed in a similar manner to salmon escapement, resident species having eluded and/or survived anglers throughout the spring, summer, and fall seasons, that are concentrated in feeding and/or staging areas for the winter months, should be protected and given respite from constant angling pressure.

Recognizing that most of the anglers participating in this winter fishery are local residents it is understandable that the opportunity to target these fish at a time when the fish are easier to locate is attractive and gaining in popularity. The Kenai River resident species are under duress via a myriad of influences in river including the increased population of pinnipeds, decreased salmon spawning activity, altering of food sources, changing weather and water conditions, as well as angling pressure. Of the influences mentioned above, angling pressure and decreased salmon spawning activity are the only factors that can be addressed by the Board.

As the winter months pass a population of resident fish with potential to spawn begin to concentrate and stage in areas downstream of Skilak Lake. These pre-spawn fish require unabated access to food sources and staging areas in order to successfully spawn. The disturbance and/or potential relocation of these pre-spawn fish due to angling pressure could prove detrimental to the spawning success of these resident fishes.

The concept of protecting staging fish in the winter and pre-spawn fish in spring months has merit and precedence in the State of Alaska;

- Ex: The late fall and spring closure of the Anchor River for the protection of the Steelhead population.

If the board takes no action the Kenai River resident species will continue to be targeted year round, including winter months when the fish are concentrated and easily targeted. The continued excessive pressure on the Kenai River in months of subfreezing temperatures has the potential for the in river resident species to experience a decline in older/larger fish, resulting in a lack of large fish capable of participating in, and surviving the spawning cycle.

Other considerations; Restrict access via the various agencies public use facilities in the area. There are private landowners that access, and provide access, to the Kenai River in this area so this consideration is not viable.

Close the Kenai River from ADF&G regulatory markers at the outlet of Skilak Lake downstream to Bings Landing January 1 - June 10. This would place a burden on users and eliminate the opportunity for local residents and landowners to fish for sockeye during the early run sockeye season and thus was considered not viable.

**PROPOSED BY:** Josh Hayes

(HQ-F23-046)

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