

Traditional knowledge presentation to the Board of Fisheries, by Loren Leman

Chairman Wood and members of the BOF,

I am Loren Leman, a resident of Anchorage. Today I am representing the Ninilchik Traditional Council (NTC) as well as my own extended family. The NTC is the governing arm of the Ninilchik Village Tribe, which counts nearly 1,000 people in its membership. It is the largest employer in Ninilchik. Many members are setnet and drift fishermen in Cook Inlet. Others harvest by sport, personal use and subsistence fishing means.

Our members respect the land and water, are concerned about the resource, and want to protect our environment, including fish habitat. Greg Encelewski, the President and Chairman of NTC, asked me to pass on his personal disappointment with how the fishery has been managed over the years, especially allowing the targeting of large kings in the Kenai River for decades and seeing a resulting impact on the returning stock. However, we recognize king salmon decline is complex and neither he nor I believe this is the full cause. We are just commenting on an impact that may be greater than incidental catches of kings by the East Side Set Net (ESSN) fishery.

Leman family history

I was raised in Ninilchik and have participated in the set net fishery since statehood in 1959. Before that my father, Nick Leman, built and operated a fish trap in the same area. When Dad was 16, he and his younger brother Joe built and operated a trap at Waterfall, just south of the Clam Gulch access road. You can still see evidence of where these traps were located—their steel stakes and salt-cured posts protrude from the sand at low tide.

Traps were unfortunately outlawed when Alaska became a state. Just think about what we could do with selective harvesting and quality control if we still allowed them—of course, this time with local ownership! My paternal grandfather, Joe Leman, fished a net close to Ninilchik as early as 1911, so it's fair to say the Leman family has been fishing this area for most of the past 112 years.

One day in the fall of 1958 I accompanied Dad to his fish trap location. He had already taken the trap down for the season and piled poles high above the tide. He wanted to secure them with guy wire so fall and winter storms during big tides wouldn't take them. As he worked, he told me, "I don't think I'll need these anymore." He knew statehood was coming, and with it, the banning of fish traps. I remember Dad looking out wistfully toward the water and saying, "I don't know what I'm going to do."

Those words didn't have as much meaning to me then as they did many years later when I took on the responsibilities of adulthood and family.

Dad was 40 years old when he lost the trap, with a 9th grade education, all that was available to him in Ninilchik. He had a wife and 3 young boys. Other jobs were limited. So he tried his hand at both drifting and setnetting. He didn't last long as a drifter.

When we started setnetting in 1959, our season opened on May 25 and by regulation extended to December 31. The practical ending date was more like October 8 or so because of the onset of cold weather and the tail end of the coho run. I recall coming down to our beach cabin with Dad early in the morning for a 7 am opening, finding a layer of ice in our wash basin, grabbing my gloves, boots and slickers and then setting a beach net with a truck and running line in the semi-darkness. Late season fishing helped pay my way through college. But through BOF action we lost time at both ends of our seasons.

What is our impact?

We learned and taught valuable life lessons in discipline, hard work and integrity. We estimate that over those years we hired 150 to 200 young men for our crew and perhaps 12 young women.

Two fathers told me, "I sent you a boy, you sent me back a man." One season we were swamped with pinks—and needed help on short notice. We invited a young woman from Ninilchik to help us for a few days. She had been taught well by her father and outpicked just about all the young men we have ever had on our crew.

These workers went on to fish at other sites in Cook Inlet and in Bristol Bay, attend college, service academies, medical school, seminary, trade schools. They have since owned their own fishing businesses, become engineers, pilots, doctors, nurses, teachers, coaches, mechanics, carpenters, painters, electricians, entrepreneurs and legislators.

We purchase food and fuel, supplies, tools, outboard motors, repair services and more from local vendors—and sell fish to local processors. We have hosted countless visitors and friends, including DFG area biologists and administrators, tribal leaders, Governor Dunleavy, Senator Sullivan, Senator Micciche, Representative Vance and others.

Ours is a story similar to what several hundred other Cook Inlet fishermen could tell.

Solutions to consider

So, what's the cost of a season closure? By my accounting, perhaps \$50 million for the 2023 season. But if the intangibles are included? Immeasurable!

Could it have been done differently and still protected a weakened stock? Absolutely.

The estimate of large late run Kenai River kings caught by all the set nets the last season we fished in 2022 was 41. Is it worth over-escaping 2 million reds to the Kasilof and Kenai Rivers

in exchange for those kings? I don't think so. Last season drifters caught 35 of these kings and no one is talking about closing them. Nor should they.

We went to 24 meshes deep for most of our gear after our first season in 1959. Admittedly, we didn't do this to reduce our king catch—it had more to do with managing our catch of kelp and other seaweed prevalent in our area. But looking back we now believe it had an ancillary benefit to king bycatch.

We seldom catch a king anymore, so it's tough to spot a pattern, but when we did, almost never were they in our beach or flat nets—those nets within 600 feet of the mean high tide mark. That restriction is a tool that is better than a total shutdown.

We aren't saying to ignore the decline in king salmon returns to the Kenai River. But we are asking you to consider options that are less painful to those of us who have been fishing the 60 miles of beach from Ninilchik to Nikiski—in many cases, for decades.

Reduction in gear length and depth, selective restriction to 600 feet or even ¼ mile, counting all kings, setting a more realistic SEG target and dropping the OEG, releasing live kings, and intensive monitoring of kings that are harvested, perhaps with a cap, are all tools that can be part of a management plan.

Closure

Our family—and hundreds of other members of NTC don't really want a handout, but rather the opportunity to carry on the fishing traditions we have practiced for generations. One of the greatest compliments I have been paid came from my own son, "Dad, thank you for teaching me how to work. I want you to teach my children the same." I hope my health, patience, and the opportunity will still enable me to do that. Our two daughters probably didn't enjoy fishing quite as much as our son, but they were good sports about it, came out in the skiff with me, and helped a lot with beach support.

Best wishes as you consider options to get us back in the water. We don't want setnetting to become a relic of the past, like the fish trap.

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