

Norm Darch Public Testimony UCI BOF**02.25.24**

My name is Norm Darch, my family and I have a setnet site on Salamatof Beach. The acronym SET has been discussed here and in a testimony to the Senate Finance Committee on Feb 2, 2024. The Commissioner of Fish and Game stated that “our escapement goals are based on maximum sustained yield. They’re not based on ensuring the extinction of the species. Those are much lower numbers, for instance, even in the Kenai River where we have loss of yield opportunity for commercial, sport, and PU fishermen, for Chinook Salmon, we’re still putting 13,000 plus fish into those river systems and that really is a yield concern...that’s the escapement goal not a concern over the risk of extinction.” The narrative with the public is just the opposite.

The Kenai King Salmon Action plan does a good job laying out the history of the escapement goals and the “paired restrictions”! When the department established the large fish goal of 13.5 -27 K, the bar for achieving that goal was the hardest it had ever been. We started seeing reductions in time and area. In 2019 we started seeing reductions in our gear. In 2020 the Board implemented the OEG and by 2021 the harvesting power of the ESSN had been reduced by 2/3 and that is if we are allowed to fish. Here we are again, looking at how the ESSN fleet can reduce its impact on king salmon.

You are in a position of mitigating risk, risk to the resource not just Chinook but sockeye, risk to habitat, and yes risk to jobs and local economies. The current large fish goal may allow for a more accurate way to enumerate fish, however, none of these numbers are actual fish! They are passage estimates and as such, there are errors associated with these. I have heard it said that this goal allows us to account for about 90% of all the egg production in the river. It has also been said that we are in a period of low productivity due to changes in ocean and river conditions. Recent larger escapements do not seem to be replacing themselves. So, until the conditions change, putting extra fish into the system does not necessarily provide benefit.

What would I like to see?

- We need predictability or regular periods for both harvesters and processors. We have not had regular periods, I do not believe, since 2011.
- Elimination of the OEG. Many paid staff developed the large fish escapement goal. Although the low end of the SEG is a hard bar to achieve, the OEG may be unattainable within the current productivity levels.
- A harvest cap of 500 large fish to be divided between the two Sections. Our harvest power has been reduced by 2/3, relative to gear, more if we factor in time restrictions.

Thank you!