

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

1 (800) 315-6338 (MEET) Code: 58756# (KUSKO)

ADF&G Bethel toll free: 1 (855) 933-2433

November 10, 2021

The postseason KRSMWG meeting was called to order on Wednesday, November 10, 2021, at 9:03 a.m., recessed for lunch at 12:00 p.m., and reconvened at 1:05 p.m. The meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m. Meeting time was approximately 5 hours. A quorum was established and kept with 7 to 8 full voting members present throughout the meeting. Barbara Carlson (Upriver Subsistence) and Alissa Rogers (Lower River Subsistence) co-chaired the meeting.

AGENDA ITEMS

A. CONTINUING BUSINESS:

- **People to be heard** – *No people to be heard at this meeting.*

- **End of Season Subsistence Reports: Lowest River, Lower River, Middle River, Upper River, Headwaters** (*Audio for this section begins at 16:35 – Meeting Audio Part 1*)
 - **Lowest River**
 - James Charles (Downriver Elder; Tuntutuliak) said that the summer went well, and that people were able to get all salmon species down near the mouth of the Tuntutuliak River. People were glad they could fish setnets when they wanted to in the Tuntutuliak River.
 - **Lower River**
 - Mike Williams, Sr. (Lower River Subsistence; Akiak) said it was another challenging summer. Overall, he said people in the lower river harvested some kings, reds, and silvers for the winter. He was very concerned about the lack of chum salmon. People were able to catch whitefish to supplement the lack of chums. People also did well on sheefish earlier in the spring. There was also some concern about the silvers this year as there were fewer.
 - Fritz Charles (1st Member at Large; Bethel) fished only the first two openers for kings and caught fewer than he did last year. He said he did not fish much of the summer until August and caught about 20 silvers. Right before moose season, he caught a few whitefish to supplement the lack of chums available.
 - Mary Peltola (2nd Member at Large; Bethel) fished hard and caught almost 40 kings. Ms. Peltola caught the bulk of her reds before July 4, and then the rains came. There was so much rain she had to use electric fans to help dry the fish.
 - John Andrew (YK Delta RAC; Kwethluk) caught 379 reds during June and July but only about 15 chums. Mr. Andrew used smaller 5.5-inch gear for the kings this year and did better on kings than he has in previous years. He said that people had problems drying fish this past summer and that some had lost half of what they caught due to spoilage. He said that he caught some whitefish as well. Mr. Andrew also let the group know that brown bears had been raiding fish camps around Kwethluk for the past two summers. He spoke about jet boats on the Kwethluk River and how the tribal council has put in proposals to restrict those in the past but have not had success.

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- **Middle River**

- LaMont Albertson (Sportfishing; Aniak) said people around Aniak have been catching pike through the ice and some sheefish. He said that people did well with rod and reel before freeze up. Mr. Albertson also spoke about his added agenda item regarding jet boat traffic in the Aniak River tributaries. He said he was concerned that the boats are interfering with salmon spawning. He has met with Dan Gillikin, Allen Simeon (Upriver Elder) and Walter Morgan (Middle River Subsistence) regarding this topic. He said that he was going to ask for a resolution through the KRITFC that these areas be closed from June 1 to September 1 (later amended to August 31), which would affect the guiding operations but would allow moose hunters to use the tributaries. He said there could be interest in doing something similar in other rivers throughout the Kuskokwim area. *This topic was revisited in New Business – Jet boat traffic in anadromous stream headwaters.*

- **Upper River**

- Barbara Carlson (Upriver Subsistence; Sleetmute) was out of town during June, but her husband operated the fish wheel during that time and there were some sheefish caught. Her husband received the state king salmon permit but did not use it since there were few fish at the time. Ms. Carlson returned home in July and got about 10 kings, of which she gave away seven. She said the red salmon returned in good numbers but were small; an upside to the small reds was that they smoked well. She stated that they were catching similar numbers of fish as in the past, but, since they were smaller fish, they were not getting the same poundage. She said she did not see many chum salmon while operating the fish wheel and noticed fewer silvers this year. She is very concerned that this has become a multispecies problem.

- **Headwaters**

- Kevin Whitworth (Western Interior RAC; McGrath) said that people in McGrath fished for Chinook, chum, reds, and coho during the summer. He said the chums essentially never showed up. Mr. Whitworth usually catches 200–300 chum salmon for his family and dogs; he caught fewer than 10 chums this year. He said people did catch some kings but not enough. Some families fish for red salmon downriver of McGrath, but there were not many reds around in those areas this year. Some coho showed up but not many. He said that some people fished for whitefish and pike into October but had to pull nets early because of ice. He also said that moose hunting was slow this year.

2021 Preliminary Kuskokwim River Season Summary (ADF&G)

- **Assessment Overview (*Audio for this section begins at 1:12:08 – Meeting Audio Part 1*)**

- Sean Larson (ADF&G) spoke briefly on the inseason projects (Bethel Test Fish and Kuskokwim River Sonar) and gave preliminary numbers for the king salmon run reconstruction. The 2021 king salmon run was estimated to be 129,005 fish with a 101,203 fish escapement (SEG 65,000–120,000). He explained that all assessed king, sockeye, and coho escapement goals were met, but there were record low escapements for chum salmon.

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Aerial surveys of Kuskokwim River tributaries were unable to be flown this year due to weather and pilot availability.

- Further discussion between Sean Larson, Barbara Carlson, LaMont Albertson was had regarding the operation of the Kwethluk River weir and what could be the reasoning behind the chum salmon record low escapement. Frank Harris (USFWS) stated that the plan was to run the Kwethluk River weir in 2022. Sean Larson (ADF&G) stated that research into the chum decline is ongoing, but that it could be due to food web shifts in the Bering Sea.
- Sean Larson gave an overview of the Three System Index. Mr. Larson explained that the index sums the total king salmon runs of the Kuskokwim, Upper Yukon, and Unalakleet Rivers and if the sum is less than 250,000, NPFMC reduces bycatch limits for the Bering Sea pollock fishery. Since the 2021 Three System Index is 165,148, the pollock fleet will have a lower bycatch cap in 2022. ***For more information on this topic, see pages 20–21 of the Informational Packet 11/10/21.***
- The above topic led into a larger discussion between multiple members of the group and ADF&G staff regarding king and chum salmon bycatch in the pollock fishery. Additional discussion was had regarding chum salmon interception in the Area M fishery. ***Below is a general summary of these discussions. For more information, refer to the meeting audio for this section.***
 - Discussion was had on the amount of chum bycatch in the pollock fishery. ***For more information on this topic, refer to pages 49–50 of the Informational Packet 11/10/21.***
 - There was discussion about using genetic testing to determine stock of origin for chum salmon caught by the Bering Sea pollock fishery or by the Area M fishery. John Linderman (ADF&G) explained that we currently do not have the genetic precision to distinguish between Kuskokwim River fish and other Coastal Western Alaska stocks (includes Norton Sound, Yukon Summer Chum, Kuskokwim River, and Western Bristol Bay stocks). Previous research shows that a large portion of chum salmon caught as bycatch in Alaskan waters were from Asian origin.
 - There was agreement between working group members that action needed to be taken on chum salmon now in both the Bering Sea bycatch and Area M fishery. There was some frustration amongst members with the speed in which the government acted on these matters.
 - John Linderman, Kevin Whitworth, and Jim Simon (KRITFC) had a discussion on stock of concern status for Kuskokwim River salmon stocks going into the 2023 board cycle. Mr. Linderman explained that data from the upcoming 2022 season would be needed to inform stock of concern analyses that would be presented at the Board of Fisheries October 2022 work session.
- ***Subsistence Overview (Audio for this section begins at 47:30 – Meeting Audio Part 2. The presentation can be viewed at pages 22–29 of the Informational Packet 11/10/21)***
 - Alida Trainor (ADF&G) gave an overview of subsistence programs in the Kuskokwim River area. This presentation was focused on developing the best way of moving forward with the non-salmon spawning tributaries surveys the subsistence division has been conducting in the lower Kuskokwim River.

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- 2022/2023 Board of Fish Update by Nick Smith (ADF&G) (*Audio for this section begins at 56:35 – Meeting Audio Part 2*)
 - **Proposal Deadline: April 11, 2022 for Bristol Bay; Arctic, Yukon, Kuskokwim; Alaska Peninsula, Aleutian Islands, Bering Sea, Chignik; and Statewide finfish management areas**
 - **AYK Regular Meeting: January 14-18, 2023 in Anchorage**
 - **PWS Finfish Meeting November 30-Dec 6, 2021.**
 - **Proposal 279: Kuskokwim River King Permits sunset date extension (*For more information on this proposal, see page 30 of the Informational Packet – 11/10/21*)**

B. NEW BUSINESS:

- **Response to KRSMWG letter to Governor (*Audio for this section begins at 1:01:30 – Meeting Audio Part 2, and the topic is discussed again at 50:19 – Meeting Audio Part 3*)**
 - Mary Peltola drafted the letter to the Governor, and it was unanimously supported by Working Group members at the July 28th meeting. Ms. Peltola signed the letter on behalf of the Working Group due to difficulties in getting signatures from others that lived outside of Bethel. The letter focused on the lack of chum returns to the Kuskokwim River over the past two summers and asked for more information on chum interception in the Area M fishery and chum and king salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. The letter can be accessed at pages 31–32 of the informational packet. A response was made to Ms. Peltola by ADF&G Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang on behalf of the Governor. The response letter provided information on the history of Area M fishery management, federal management of the Bering Sea pollock fishery, past and ongoing genetics studies, and contacts for each of these topics.
 - There was discussion between Mary Peltola, Barbara Carlson, and LaMont Albertson who expressed their overall dissatisfaction with the response. ***Ultimately, this discussion led to Motion 2 below, a resolution to ask specifically for genetics research in the Area M and Bering Sea pollock fisheries and addressing climate change effects.***
 - ***Audio regarding discussion of the bullet points to include in the resolution began at 50:19 – Meeting Audio 3. The topics discussed are briefly outlined below-***
 - Mary Peltola stated that the group should ask the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to update the 11-year-old Area M chum genetics analysis.
 - Barb Carlson stated that available genetic data should be used to determine what chum stocks are currently running through Area M. Ms. Carlson realized that it might not be possible to distinguish between Kuskokwim fish and the overall Coastal Western Alaska group but stated that all Coastal Western stocks were doing poorly, so this information would be useful.
 - Fritz Charles stated that because we are asking for genetics in Area M, we should also include Norton Sound, Unalakleet, Yukon River, Kuskokwim River, and Bristol Bay chum salmon genetics to better understand what Area M is intercepting. Mary Peltola asked if Fritz would be willing to include king salmon and coho salmon to this request, he agreed to include those species.
 - Alissa Rogers stated that within the document, it needed to be said that subsistence harvest needs are not being met, and that the restriction on subsistence users enacted to meet escapement goals is not working. Ms. Rogers also called for issues surrounding food security be added into the resolution.

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- Mary Peltola gave her thoughts on including a bullet point that stipulates the state should not be pursuing competitive federal funds to do these genetic analyses asked for in this resolution because the state is so opposed to federal management. Ms. Peltola asked if Barbara Carlson, Fritz Charles, John Andrew, or Alissa Rogers had thoughts on this topic. Barbara Carlson stated that she had mixed feelings and that to her it comes down to wanting to see the genetics done and ADF&G does not have as much money as they did in the past. Alissa Rogers said to put the bullet point in the resolution, so it is on the record. There was no further discussion on this topic.
- Kevin Whitworth stated that he wanted the resolution to direct the state to investigate stock of concern designations for chum and king salmon.
- **KRITFC written comments to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC) *Audio for this section begins at 11:00 – Meeting Audio Part 3; The letter can be accessed at pages 37–39 of the Informational Packet – 11/10/21.***
 - Mike Williams wrote the letter. Briefly, the letter asked the NPFMC to limit king and chum salmon bycatch to zero, to amend the Magnuson-Stevens Act to add two Tribal seats to the NPFMC, to send a letter to the NMFS supporting funding for disaster declarations and research, and to support and encourage NOAA to initiate Tribal Consultation. ***This letter along with the KRITFC Kuskokwim River Chinook and Chum Salmon Situation Report can be accessed at pages 37–53 of the Informational Packet – 11/10/21.***
 - Mary Peltola stated that she gave testimony to the NPFMC in October regarding the topics raised in the KRITFC letter and Situation Report. Ms. Peltola asked the NPFMC to consider amending the Magnuson-Stevens Act to include two Tribal seats to the NPFMC, to consider appointing Traditional Knowledge holders to NPFMC standing committees, and to reduce king and chum salmon bycatch to zero. Ms. Peltola reported that the council was opposed to doing these things.
 - Mike Williams spoke to his concern with salmon returns and stated that people needed to do everything they can to help salmon returns in the future. He stated that more genetic research needed to be conducted on salmon caught in the Area M fishery. Mr. Williams also said climate change impacts needed to be addressed.
 - LaMont Albertson said that food security should be included in the discussion with the NPFMC.
 - Further discussion on this topic was had between members Mike Williams, Mary Peltola, LaMont Albertson, and Fritz Charles. ***This discussion ultimately led to Motion 1 below.***
- **Jet boat traffic in anadromous stream headwaters (*Audio for this topic begins at 25:09 – Meeting Audio Part 1; the topic is revisited at 1:19:10 – Meeting Audio Part 3*)**
 - LaMont Albertson reiterated what was stated during the subsistence reports. He said that he wanted to contact others along the Kuskokwim River to see if there was interest in restricting jet boat traffic in other salmon spawning rivers. He clarified that he was going to ask KRITFC to take this up as a resolution, and that he was hoping the KRSMWG would do the same.
 - Mike Williams stated that the Tuluksak, Kisarolik, Kwethluk, and other rivers in the vicinity needed to be part of the discussion.
 - Alissa Rogers spoke with Nick Smith (ADF&G) about the anadromous waters catalogue. It is the summary writer’s interpretation that this conversation brought about the language used in the motion (i.e., references to “headwaters of anadromous streams” instead of specific rivers).
 - John Andrew spoke about how the Village of Kwethluk has put in these types of proposals in the past, but the board has not listened. He has heard people talk about issues with jet boats all

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throughout the Kuskokwim Area. He reiterated what LaMont Albertson had said about the boats being able to run in very shallow water and disturb the river bottom.

- Mary Peltola made the overall motion for this topic (*See Motion 3*), which included that the resolution be drafted at a later date. Note that in her motion she said to potentially close the headwaters of anadromous streams to both jet traffic and outboard motor traffic during spawning (June 1 – August 31). The official motion read back by the department only referenced jet boat traffic.

Working Group Motions:

Motion 1: For the Working Group to write a letter to the North Pacific Fisheries Marine Council that supports the letter previously sent to the council by the Kuskokwim River Intertribal Fish Commission. The letter would additionally ask the council for Chinook and chum salmon genetic studies to be conducted and to look into climate change impacts on these species. *Passed (Unanimous)*

Motion 2: In response to the Commissioner's letter to the Working Group, for the Working Group to pass a resolution that would primarily ask for more genetics research be done regarding Area M fisheries and Bering Sea bycatch. *Passed (Unanimous)*

Motion 3: For the Working Group to draft, at a later date, a resolution to protect the headwaters of anadromous streams by potentially closing jet boat traffic in these areas from June 1 to August 31. *Passed (Unanimous)*

COMMENTS FROM THE WORKING GROUP: *None*

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WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:

MEMBER SEAT:	NAME:
DOWNRIVER ELDER	James Charles
UPRIVER ELDER	Absent
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams, Sr.
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Absent
UPRIVER SUBSISTENCE	Barbara Carlson
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	Absent
1 st MEMBER AT LARGE	Fritz Charles
2 nd MEMBER AT LARGE	Mary Peltola
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Kevin Whitworth
YK DELTA RAC	John Andrew
COMMERCIAL FISHING	Absent
SPORT FISHING	LaMont Albertson
KRITFC	Absent
ADF&G	Nick Smith
CHAIR	Barbara Carlson (morning) / Alissa Rogers (afternoon)

Other Participants:		
<u>ADF&G</u>		
<u>Comm. Fish:</u> Chuck Brazil, Bobette Dickerson, Ben Gray, Sean Larson, Zach Liller, John Linderman, Nick Smith		
<u>Sport Fish:</u> John Chythlook		
<u>Subsistence:</u> Chriss McDevitt, Lisa Olsen, Alida Trainor		
<u>USFWS:</u> Boyd Blihovde, Gary Decossas, Frank Harris Aaron Moses, Chris Tulik		
<u>OSM:</u> Cory Graham		
Janessa Esquible (ONC) Dan Gillikin (NVN) Paige Jones (AVCP) Barbara Johnson (NVG)	Terese Schomogyi (KRITFC) Jim Simon (KRITFC)	
		<u>Media:</u> Greg Kim (KYUK)
		<u>WG Alternates:</u> Alissa Rogers (Lower River Subsistence)

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS:

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G, **department, State**), Orutsararmiut Traditional Native Council (OTNC), Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP), Georgetown Traditional Council (GTC), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Bethel Test Fishery project (BTF), Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE), Coastal Village Seafoods (CVS), ADF&G Commercial Fisheries Division (CF), ADF&G Sport Fisheries Division (SF), Regional Advisory Council (RAC), Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (KRSMWG, **Working Group, or WG**), Sustainable Escapement Goal (SEG), Biological Escapement Goal (BEG), Management Objective (MO), Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence (ANS), Emergency Order (EO), Bering Sea Fishermen's Association (BSFA), Law Enforcement (LE), Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC), Native Village of Napaimute (NVN), Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC), Alaska State Troopers (AST), University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), Alaska Wildlife Troopers (AWT), Office of Subsistence Management (OSM), Native Village of Georgetown (NVG), North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC)

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