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## **Advisory Announcement**

*For Immediate Release: May 15, 2020*

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### **COVID-19**

Under Alaska's Health Mandates 10, 11, and 12, commercial fishing is an Essential Business and is part of Alaska's Essential Services and Critical Infrastructure. Commercial fishermen should ensure that all travel and other activities in support of commercial fishing operations follow protocols in Alaska COVID-19 Health Mandates. COVID-19 Health Mandates may be found here: <https://gov.alaska.gov/home/covid19-healthmandates/>

## **2020 NORTON SOUND SALMON MANAGEMENT PLAN**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Norton Sound is comprised of two fishing districts, the Norton Sound District and the Port Clarence District (Figure 1). The Norton Sound District extends from Cape Douglas south to Point Romanof and includes over 500 miles of coastline. The area open to commercial salmon fishing is divided into six subdistricts. Each subdistrict contains at least one major spawning stream with commercial fishing effort located in the ocean near stream mouths. The Port Clarence District encompasses all waters from Cape Douglas north to Cape Prince of Wales. The commercial salmon fishing area is adjacent to the communities of Brevig Mission and Teller (Figure 2).

Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G, department) staffing for salmon management within Norton Sound includes three permanent biologists, a program technician and 18 seasonal employees during the summer months. Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) funds 20 interns to work on cooperative projects between NSEDC and ADF&G, and NSEDC projects. Anticipated department management projects in 2020 include: Kwiniuk River counting tower; Bonanza weir; Nome River weir; Solomon River weir; periodic aerial surveys of index spawning streams; and catch sampling and monitoring efforts at Nome and Unalakleet. A cooperative project with other agencies may occur at the Unalakleet River weir (BLM, NSEDC and Unalakleet IRA). Department staff will also track the salmon escapement counts reported on other cooperative projects administered by NSEDC on the following rivers: North, Snake, Shaktoolik, Ungalik, Inglutalik, Eldorado, and Pilgrim. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic some projects may not operate this year because of quarantine and staffing issues.

### **2020 RUN OUTLOOK**

Salmon outlooks and harvest projections for the 2020 salmon season are based on qualitative assessments of parent-year escapements, sibling relationships, subjective determinations of freshwater overwintering and ocean survival, and in the case of the commercial fishery, the projections of local market conditions. Continuing the trends seen over the past three years there were high coho and chum salmon harvests with last year's commercial coho salmon harvest, the fourth highest on record, and the chum salmon harvest, the third highest harvest since 1983 (Table 1). The department expects better coho and chum salmon runs in 2020, and a Chinook salmon run

like last year. The regular subsistence fishing schedule from mid-June until mid-July in Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts is expected to be in effect for Chinook salmon with no additional subsistence restrictions. No commercial fishing for Chinook salmon is expected but incidentally caught Chinook salmon in commercial fisheries will be allowed to be sold. Chum salmon runs are expected to be well above average and the harvest is expected to be 180,000 to 230,000 fish. The department expects the pink salmon run to be well above average for an even-numbered year, but harvest will depend on buyer interest and could range from 25,000 to 75,000 fish. No pink salmon directed fishing periods would be expected because of buyer interest in more valuable salmon species and the pink salmon harvest would likely be an incidental harvest only. However, the department does have the authority to increase fishing net aggregate length from 100 fathoms to 200 fathoms if there were a pink salmon directed fishery. The coho salmon run is expected to be well above average based on ocean survival conditions in recent years and the commercial harvest is expected to be 200,000 to 250,000 fish. In the Port Clarence District, the department expects the commercial fishery to remain closed because of a lack of buyer interest despite the in-river goal of 30,000 sockeye salmon at Pilgrim River expected to be reached. Subsistence fishing closures in the Pilgrim River are not expected, but the department will limit sockeye salmon subsistence harvest to 25 fish initially and will increase or waive the limit if the run is like the last several years.

## **MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Department staff will manage salmon fisheries to ensure escapement goals are achieved. Subsistence fishing may need to be restricted or closed if concerns for escapement arise. Commercial fishing will occur depending on market availability and if there is an adequate surplus in excess of escapement and subsistence needs. Informational updates will be broadcast periodically over Nome public radio stations and Advisory Announcements sent to the Unalakleet radio station for broadcast to inform fishermen of current regulations, catches, escapements and ADF&G activities. The Unalakleet office will not be open this year because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The public may call the Nome office toll-free number at 1-800-560-2271 or the local number of 443-5167 for information.

Because of the lower snowfall this past winter river levels are expected to be normal and not high like last year when there were delays getting escapement projects operational. If there are cases where subdistricts do not have escapement projects operational the department will compare commercial catch with historical catch values during similar time periods to determine if additional fishing time is warranted.

Subsistence salmon permits are required when net fishing in northern Norton Sound (from Elim Subdistrict to Port Clarence District) and only Alaska residents qualify for a permit. A sport fish license is required when fishing with a rod and reel in southern Norton Sound. However, in northern Norton Sound rod and reel is a legal subsistence gear but when salmon fishing using rod and reel a sport fish license or subsistence salmon permit is required. Household subsistence permits are free and this year Alaska residents will be able to get their permits online at [www.adfg.alaska.gov/store](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/store). Permits will also be issued at the Nome Fish & Game office but because of Covid-19 pandemic the department will only allow one person at a time in the office. Village residents can call 1-800-560-2271 if they are unable to get a permit online.

### **NOME SUBDISTRICT**

Subdistrict 1 (Nome) salmon management in 2020 is expected to be like last year with commercial fishing time targeting chum and coho salmon. Since Tier II chum salmon subsistence fishing was suspended in 2006, the previous subdistrict-wide escapement goal range of 23,000 to 35,000 fish has been reached or exceeded in all years except in 2009. In the last five years the escapement has ranged from 61,000 to 124,000 fish. Three rivers have chum salmon escapement goal ranges: Eldorado (4,400 to 14,200), Nome (1,600 to 5,300) and Snake (2,000 to 4,200). The range has been exceeded at all three rivers the last five years.

In marine waters, subsistence fishing is allowed 7 days a week prior to June 15 and after August 15. From June 15 through August 15 the marine waters of Nome Subdistrict, west of Cape Nome, will be open to set gillnet fishing from 6 p.m. Wednesday until 6 p.m. Monday unless closed by emergency order. Marine waters east of Cape Nome will remain open 7 days a week throughout the season unless closed by emergency order. In fresh

waters, subsistence fishing is open 7 days a week prior to June 15 and after August 31. Beginning June 15 through August 31, subsistence set gillnet fishing will be open in fresh waters from 6 p.m. Wednesday until 6 p.m. Monday. The fishing schedule listed above will be in effect unless reduced or closed by emergency order because of weaker than expected salmon runs. Dip nets and cast nets are legal gear for harvesting salmon in Norton Sound and are allowed during the set gillnet fishing periods. Beach seining is allowed during set gillnet fishing periods from June 15 through August 15.

Stream-specific harvest limits are listed on the subsistence salmon fishing permits. There are no catch limits in marine waters. Permit catch limits for Nome Subdistrict and Port Clarence District streams are listed in Table 2.

The department will use the Eldorado weir counts as the primary indicator of chum salmon run strength in Nome Subdistrict east of Cape Nome. If chum salmon escapement begins to lag compared to historical run timing curves and indicates the escapement goal range will not be met, marine and river fishing periods may be reduced or suspended until the department switches to management to other salmon species. However, the Eldorado River chum salmon escapement is expected to be easily met in 2020 and daily escapement counts from the weir will be used to confirm that the run is tracking as expected. This will be the third year of Bonanza weir so no historical comparison can be made except by comparing aerial surveys. Aerial surveys will also be used to index escapement to the Flambeau River.

The department will use the Nome River and Snake River escapement counts as an indicator of chum salmon run strength in the Nome Subdistrict west of Cape Nome. If the Nome River and Snake River weir counts project that the chum salmon escapement goal range will not be reached, marine and freshwater subsistence fishing periods may be restricted or suspended. However, both rivers are expected to easily exceed the escapement goal ranges. The Cripple and Penny rivers are closed by regulation to subsistence chum salmon fishing. The Sinuk River is expected to have good chum and sockeye salmon runs in 2020.

Commercial fishing periods are expected in Nome Subdistrict for chum salmon and possibly pink salmon if there is buyer interest. Commercial fishing for coho salmon in August is also expected. Directed fishing periods for chum and coho salmon will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and for pink salmon to a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches.

## **GOLOVIN SUBDISTRICT**

The chum run is expected to be well above average with commercial fishing expected to begin in mid- to late-June if run strength comes in as expected

The Niukluk River tower project is no longer operational, but a counting tower project initiated by NSEDC has operated on the Fish River downstream of the confluence of the Niukluk River the last six years. If the Fish River project operates this year the department will use the counts as an index to compare with other salmon run assessments to determine if continued commercial fishing time is warranted.

If the Fish River project is unable to accurately enumerate the salmon run because of high water, or the project does not operate, then the chum salmon escapement counts in the adjacent Subdistrict 3 will be used as an indicator of the chum salmon run in Subdistrict 2 along with a peak aerial survey count if possible. By comparing Niukluk River tower chum salmon counts (1995-2012) with Kwiniuk River tower chum salmon counts of the same year there has been agreement between both rivers achieving and not achieving their respective escapement goals in 16 of 18 years. The department will also evaluate catch per unit of effort (CPUE), if there is commercial fishing, with historical commercial fishing periods during similar dates to determine if additional fishing time is warranted.

Both the Fish River tower site and the former Niukluk River tower site are much farther upstream than the adjacent Subdistrict 3 counting tower on Kwiniuk River. The department historically has used the counts from Kwiniuk River tower to determine early season chum salmon openings in Subdistrict 2. Further commercial chum salmon fishing opportunity after mid-July will be dependent on chum salmon escapement.

The pink salmon run should allow for commercial fishing periods in July if there is buyer interest and coho salmon commercial fishing periods are expected beginning in late July. Until mid-August coho commercial CPUE will

be used to set commercial coho salmon fishing time. By mid-August, if the Fish River counting tower is operational, the department will determine additional fishing time based on coho salmon escapement as estimated by the counting tower. Also, the department plans to conduct aerial surveys of Niukluk River and Ophir Creek to determine if the aerial survey goal of 750 to 1,600 coho salmon will be reached. Directed fishing periods for chum and coho salmon will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and for pink salmon to a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches.

## **ELIM SUBDISTRICT**

Except for 2014, when hook and line subsistence fishing for Chinook salmon was closed, there have been no other subsistence restrictions in over 30 years in Subdistrict 3 (Elim). Subsistence permits are required when subsistence salmon fishing in the Elim Subdistrict and other than the possibility of inseason Chinook salmon restrictions no other restrictions are expected.

Commercial fishing for chum salmon is expected to begin in mid- to late-June and the run is expected to be like last year. The pink salmon run is expected to be well above average for an even-numbered year, but buyer interest in pink salmon directed fishing periods is not expected.

Commercial coho salmon openings are likely beginning the end of July depending on the expected above average run strength. Directed fishing periods for chum and coho salmon will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and if a pink salmon directed fishing period occurs maximum mesh size will be restricted at 4 ½ inches.

## **NORTON BAY SUBDISTRICT**

Commercial salmon fishing returned to Subdistrict 4 (Norton Bay) in 2008 after 10 years without a buyer, and commercial fishing has occurred every year since. Previously, salmon markets had not been able to attract interested fishermen or buyers. Inseason escapement monitoring indices for this subdistrict were not available in previous years and the department used information from nearby subdistricts to determine if commercial fishing time was warranted along with historical CPUE comparisons. However, since 2011 NSEDC has operated a counting tower on the Inglutalik River and the department plans to use salmon escapement counts from the project as an index to compare with other projects in 2020. If the project proves to be an accurate assessment over several generations of salmon escapement the department would be able to set tower-based escapement goals. NSEDC also plans to again have a counting tower on Ungalik River this season.

In the last decade there have been record commercial harvests of pink (2012), chum (2013) and coho (2015) salmon. Commercial salmon fishing harvests are expected to be below average for chum and coho salmon in 2020 based on runs in recent years.

No restrictions on subsistence fishing are expected this year.

## **SHAKTOOLIK AND UNALAKLEET SUBDISTRICTS**

Subdistricts 5 (Shaktoolik) and 6 (Unalakleet) have been managed as one fishery because past studies have shown salmon bound for these subdistricts intermingle and that harvests in one subdistrict likely will affect the other. If there is a salmon surplus a commercial fishery will occur, but no commercial fishing is expected for Chinook salmon. Chum and pink salmon will be targeted commercially depending on market interest and gillnet fishing would likely occur the second half of June to allow more time for Chinook salmon to pass through the subdistricts.

Abundance of the Chinook salmon run will be monitored using passage estimates from the Unalakleet River weir and a counting tower on the North River, an important Chinook salmon spawning tributary in the Unalakleet River drainage. The escapement goal range for the North River is 1,200–2,600 Chinook salmon. However, for a Chinook salmon directed commercial fishery to occur, the department must project an escapement of a minimum of 1,900 Chinook salmon past the North River tower.

To protect Chinook salmon the subsistence fishing schedule in regulation will go into effect on June 15 in Subdistricts 5 and 6. The subsistence fishing schedule in the marine waters of Shaktoolik and Unalakleet Subdistricts is from 6:00 p.m. Monday until 6:00 p.m. Wednesday and from 6:00 p.m. Thursday until 6:00 p.m. Saturday. The schedule in the Unalakleet River is from 8:00 a.m. Monday until 8:00 p.m. Tuesday and from 8:00 a.m. Friday until 8:00 p.m. Saturday. If the Chinook salmon run is falls behind the amount necessary to reach the escapement goal the department will suspend the subsistence fishing schedule.

Based on the recent 5-year trend in run performance and sibling relationships, the 2020 Chinook salmon run to southern Norton Sound is expected to be like 2019. If that occurs there is the possibility of reaching Chinook salmon escapement goal without the need for subsistence fishing closures. Regulations allow beach seines with a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches to be used from July 1 through August 10 to harvest salmon other than Chinook salmon seven days a week.

Chum and pink salmon directed commercial gillnet fishing periods are expected beginning in late June. Chum and pink salmon runs are expected to be well above average. Chum salmon gillnet fishing periods will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and pink salmon directed fishing periods will have gear restricted to a maximum mesh size of 4 ½ inches. Coho salmon commercial fishing openings are expected in late July with a well above average run forecast. Department management for coho salmon season is considered to begin on July 25, or when coho salmon catches exceed chum salmon catches. Coho gear will be restricted to a maximum mesh size of 6 inches and the regular 48-hour periods will be in effect or extended if there are no escapement and buyer capacity concerns

Shaktoolik Subdistrict directed chum and coho salmon fisheries may be managed somewhat differently. Recurring high surf conditions have sometimes severely limited commercial fishing time in this subdistrict. Whereas Unalakleet Subdistrict permit holders are often able to fish two 48-hour commercial fishing periods a week, the department may have a 72-hour commercial fishing period in Shaktoolik if weather prevents permit holders for setting gear for extended periods of time. This strategy should help maintain interest in the fishery and lead to safer fishing conditions and improved quality of fish delivered to buyers. Additionally, severe weather conditions affecting fishing should also allow enough chum and coho salmon to enter the Shaktoolik and Unalakleet rivers for escapement and subsistence needs. Changes to the fishing schedule from previous years may occur depending on the buyer requesting a change based on capacity limits and quality issues.

## **ST. MICHAEL AND STEBBINS**

Subsistence fishing is open 7 days per week in southern Norton Sound from Pt. Romanof to Black Point. Regulation allows for the restriction of gillnet mesh size in the subsistence fisheries throughout Norton Sound if it is necessary to conserve Chinook salmon.

## **PORT CLARENCE DISTRICT**

The sockeye salmon run is expected to reach the inriver goal of 30,000 fish in Pilgrim River and therefore a commercial fishery targeting sockeye salmon could occur but is not expected because of the lack of a buyer.

Subsistence salmon fishing permits are required for the Port Clarence District, Pilgrim River drainage and Salmon Lake. Salmon Lake will only be opened by emergency order and permits are only available at the Fish and Game office in Nome. Catch limits are listed on subsistence permits and in Table 2.

Based on the well above average sockeye salmon runs the last five years the department expects 2020 to have a well above average run again. The department will compare the 2020 sockeye salmon run with historical escapement counts at the Pilgrim River weir after the first week of July and decide if a change is warranted in subsistence catch limit or if a closure may be necessary to reach the escapement goal range. The Pilgrim River escapement goal range is 6,800 to 36,000 sockeye salmon through the weir. No other subsistence fishing closures are expected in Port Clarence District.

## **TABLES AND FIGURES**

Table 1. Commercial catch by salmon species, Norton Sound District, 1961 – 2019.

Year	Chinook	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
1961	5,300	35	13,807	34,327	48,332	101,801
1962	7,286	18	9,156	33,187	182,784	232,431
1963	6,613	71	16,765	55,625	154,789	233,863
1964	2,018	126	98	13,567	148,862	164,671
1965	1,449	30	2,030	220	36,795	40,524
1966	1,553	14	5,755	12,778	80,245	100,345
1967	1,804	0	2,379	28,879	41,756	74,818
1968	1,045	0	6,885	71,179	45,300	124,409
1969	2,392	0	6,836	86,949	82,795	178,972
1970	1,853	0	4,423	64,908	107,034	178,218
1971	2,593	0	3,127	4,895	131,362	141,977
1972	2,938	0	454	45,182	100,920	149,494
1973	1,918	0	9,282	46,499	119,098	176,797
1974	2,951	0	2,092	148,519	162,267	315,829
1975	2,393	2	4,593	32,388	212,485	251,861
1976	2,243	11	6,934	87,916	95,956	193,060
1977	4,500	5	3,690	48,675	200,455	257,325
1978	9,819	12	7,335	325,503	189,279	531,948
1979	10,706	57	31,438	167,411	140,789	350,401
1980	6,311	40	29,842	227,352	180,792	444,337
1981	7,929	56	31,562	232,479	169,708	441,734
1982	5,892	10	91,690	230,281	183,335	511,208
1983	10,308	27	49,735	76,913	319,437	456,420
1984	8,455	6	67,875	119,381	146,442	342,159
1985	19,491	166	21,968	3,647	134,928	180,200
1986	6,395	233	35,600	41,260	146,912	230,400
1987	7,080	207	24,279	2,260	102,457	136,283
1988	4,096	1,252	37,214	74,604	107,966	225,132
1989	5,707	265	44,091	123	42,625	92,811
1990	8,895	434	56,712	501	65,123	131,665
1991	6,068	203	63,647	0	86,871	156,789
1992	4,541	296	105,418	6,284	83,394	199,933
1993	8,972	279	43,283	157,574	53,562	263,670
1994	5,285	80	102,140	982,389	18,290	1,108,184
1995	8,860	128	47,862	81,644	42,898	181,392
1996	4,984	1	68,206	487,441	10,609	571,241
1997	12,573	161	32,284	20	34,103	79,141
1998	7,429	7	29,623	588,013	16,324	641,396
1999	2,508	0	12,662	0	7,881	23,051
2000	752	14	44,409	166,548	6,150	217,873
2001	213	44	19,492	0	11,100	30,849
2002	5	1	1,759	0	600	2,365
2003	12	21	17,060	0	3,560	20,653
2004 <sup>a</sup>	22	47	42,016	0	6,296	48,381
2005	151	12	85,523	0	3,983	89,669
2006	20	3	130,808	0	10,042	140,873
2007	19	2	126,136	3,769	22,431	152,357
2008	83	60	120,309	75,525	25,124	221,101
2009 <sup>a</sup>	84	126	87,041	17,364	34,122	138,737
2010	140	103	62,079	31,557	117,743	211,622
2011	185	369	58,917	7,141	110,555	177,167
2012 <sup>a</sup>	197	134	37,056	205,498	62,772	305,657
2013 <sup>a</sup>	151	247	53,802	8,338	118,709	181,247
2014	289	519	112,756	182,406	107,745	403,715
2015	1,288	4,199	153,929	62,888	147,497	369,801
2016	321	2,888	102,890	208,961	51,176	366,236
2017	538	2,975	191,254	20,321	163,473	378,561
2018	906	3,623	260,707	40,449	238,029	543,714
2019	1,390	7,013	139,837	76,408	157,938	382,586
Average 2014-2018	668	2,841	164,307	103,005	141,584	412,405
Average 2009-2018	410	1,518	112,043	78,492	115,182	307,645

Note: Harvest numbers may include a small number of salmon retained for personal use reported on fish tickets that were not commercially sold.

<sup>a</sup> Chinook salmon caught were not sold but were retained for personal use.

Table 1.–Norton Sound and Port Clarence Districts annual subsistence salmon permit limits.

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Norton Sound District - Nome Subdistrict

Cripple River	No chum catch allowed
Penny River	No chum catch allowed
Nome River	100 coho/household
Snake River	100 coho/household
Solomon River	40 chum/household and 20 coho/household

Port Clarence District

Pilgrim River	3 king/household and 25 sockeye/household
Salmon Lake	Open by emergency order only; 200 sockeye salmon/household

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*Note:* The waters of the Nome Subdistrict are subject to closures from June 15 to September 30. The Port Clarence District is outside the Nome Subdistrict area and, therefore, subsistence fishing can occur 7 days a week unless closed by an emergency order.



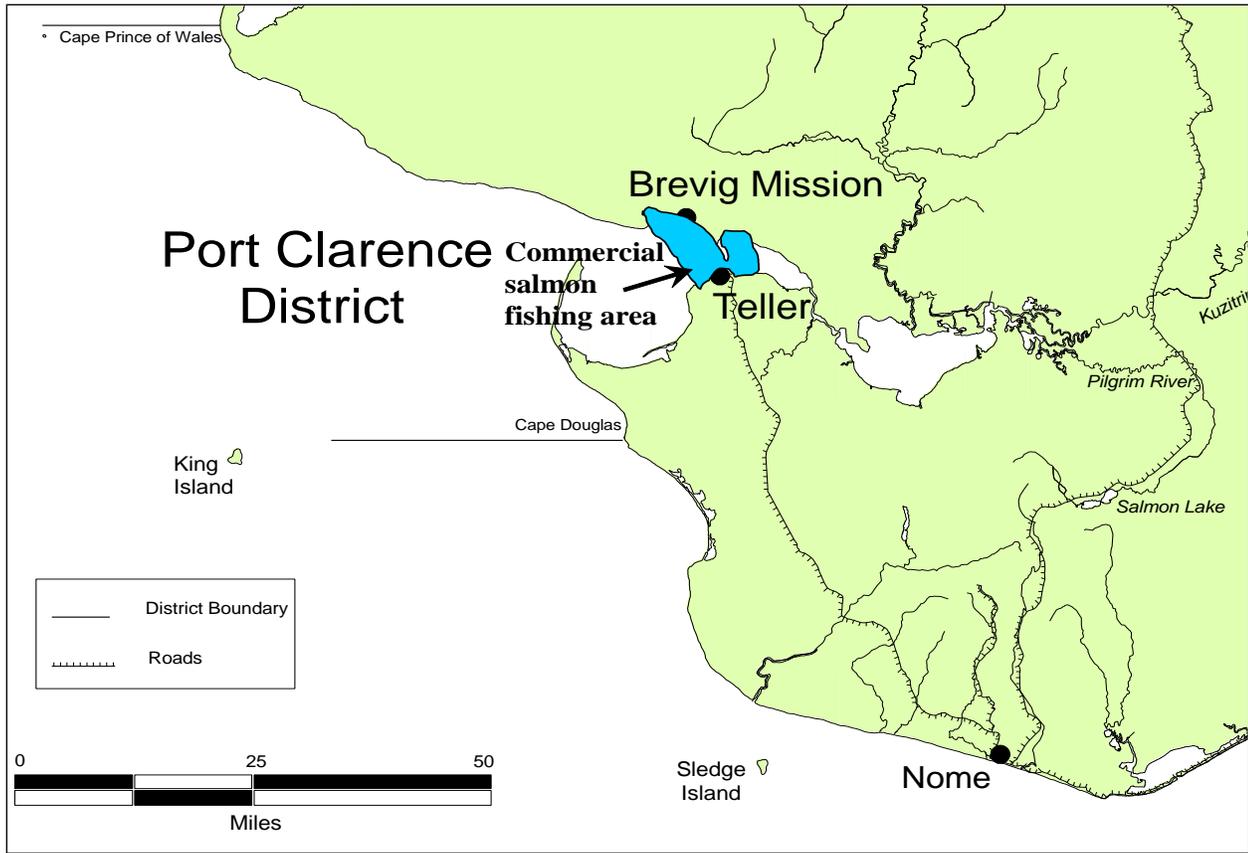


Figure 2. Port Clarence District commercial salmon fishing area.