



Advisory Announcement

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CONTACT: Heather Scannell and Jeremy Botz

**Finfish Area Management Biologists
(907) 424-3212**

2023 PRINCE WILLIAM SOUND SALMON SEASON SUMMARY

This summarizes the 2023 Prince William Sound (PWS) Area commercial salmon season. Numbers in this summary are rounded for simplicity, all data are preliminary, and 10-year averages are years 2013 through 2022.

The 2023 PWS Area commercial and hatchery cost recovery salmon harvest was 65.34 million fish. This harvest was composed of 11,300 Chinook, 1.94 million sockeye, 168,000 coho, 58.09 million pink, and 5.13 million chum salmon. The 2023 harvest included 51.97 million (80%) commercial, and 13.37 million (20%) hatchery cost recovery and broodstock fish (Table 1).

The estimated value of salmon harvest, commercial and hatchery cost recovery, was approximately \$84.58 million and 21% less than the 10-year average of \$106.66 million. During the 2023 season, 444 drift gillnet, 23 set gillnet, and 213 (199 single and 32 dual) purse seine commercial permit holders fished in at least one fishing period. Drift gillnet exvessel harvest value was an estimated \$27.56 million (average permit earnings of \$62,100 compared to a 10-year average of \$70,700); set gillnet exvessel harvest value was an estimated \$1.48 million (average permit earnings at \$64,300 compared to a 10-year average of \$72,900); and purse seine exvessel harvest value was an estimated \$34.18 million (average permit earnings at \$160,500 compared to a 10-year average of \$236,400). Revenue generated for hatchery operations was approximately \$21.36 million.

Exvessel values for all gear groups and for hatchery operations were negatively impacted by the statewide collapse in salmon markets.

GILLNET FISHERIES

COPPER RIVER DISTRICT

The 2023 preseason commercial harvest forecast for the Copper River District sockeye salmon was 987,000 fish. The 2023 Chinook salmon total run forecast was 53,000 fish. Gulkana Hatchery total run was projected to be 49,000 sockeye salmon. The Copper River sockeye salmon run was above forecast, with regular short-duration fishing periods during the first month of the fishery and extended duration fishing periods for the next two months. The sockeye salmon commercial harvest of 855,000 fish was 12% below the 10-year harvest average of 968,000 fish. The sockeye salmon season was open for 804 hours compared to a 10-year average of 610 hours. Sockeye salmon average weight of 5.4 pounds was 0.6 pounds smaller than the 30-year average (1993–2022) of 5.9 pounds. The number of wild sockeye salmon in the Copper River District commercial harvest was 804,000, or 94% of the total. Gulkana Hatchery commercial harvest was the sixth lowest in the last 10 years, contributing 42,000 sockeye salmon, or 5% of the total commercial harvest. Main Bay Hatchery (MBH) contributed 9,200 sockeye salmon, or <1% of the Copper River sockeye salmon harvest. The commercial harvest of 10,400 Chinook salmon was 17% below the 10-year average harvest of 12,600 fish. The coho salmon commercial harvest of 120,000 fish was 43% below the previous 10-year average harvest of 212,000 coho salmon.

District escapement and run goals were met or exceeded in 2023. The 2023 preliminary Mile Lake sonar passage estimate of 991,740 salmon was above the inriver goal of 610,000 salmon. The Copper River sockeye salmon sustainable escapement goal (SEG) of 360,000 – 750,000 fish was achieved based on preliminary projections of inriver harvest. Preliminary Chinook salmon inriver abundance estimates indicate that spawning escapement was likely above the upper bound SEG of 31,000 fish. The Copper River delta sockeye salmon escapement estimate of 65,775 sockeye salmon was within the SEG range of 55,000–130,000 fish. Copper River Delta coho salmon SEG of 32,000–50,000 fish was met with a preliminary peak escapement count of 43,940 fish.

BERING RIVER DISTRICT

The sockeye salmon directed commercial fishery in the Bering River District was focused on the western portion of the district to target Copper River District bound fish and had little participation. The total sockeye salmon harvest of 11,400 fish was 153% above the 10-year harvest average of 4,500 fish. The coho salmon commercial harvest of 21,900 fish was 64% below the 10-year harvest average of 60,100 fish. The aerial escapement index of 19,125 sockeye salmon was within the SEG range of 15,000–24,000 fish. Bering River District coho salmon escapement monitoring is ongoing with a peak count of 20,950 fish that is within the SEG range of 13,000–33,000 fish.

COGHILL DISTRICT

The 2023 Coghill Lake sockeye salmon total run forecast was 453,000 fish. The Coghill River weir passed 64,212 sockeye salmon, which was within the SEG range of 20,000–75,000 fish. The Coghill District sockeye salmon commercial harvest of 231,000 fish was 83% wild fish, 41% above the recent 10-year average of 164,000 fish. Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation (PWSAC) forecasted runs of 2.21 million chum and 122,000 coho salmon to Wally Noerenberg Hatchery (WNH) in 2023. The commercial chum salmon harvest in the Coghill District was 1.51 million; 4% of these were wild stock. The total chum salmon harvest in PWS attributed to WNH was 3.0 million fish, 38% above forecast. PWSAC harvested 1.34 million chum salmon (44% of the total run estimate) for cost recovery and broodstock. The Coghill District sockeye salmon commercial harvest of 231,000 fish was 83% wild fish, 41% above the recent 10-year average of 164,000 fish. The Coghill District commercial pink salmon harvest of 1.39 million fish was 42% wild fish, 48% below the recent 10-year average of 2.69 million fish. The Coghill District coho salmon commercial harvest was 6,500 fish, 85% below the 10-year average of 42,900 and 95% below PWSAC's harvest forecast of 119,000 fish.

ESHAMY DISTRICT

There was no 2023 Eshamy Lake sockeye salmon total run forecast due to the limited escapement monitoring in recent years. The Eshamy River weir passed 11,194 sockeye salmon, which was within the SEG range of 13,000–28,000 fish. PWSAC forecasted a run of 934,000 MBH enhanced sockeye salmon in 2023. The total sockeye salmon harvest in PWS attributed to MBH was 759,000 fish and was 19% below forecast. The Eshamy District commercial harvest of 505,000 sockeye salmon was 14% wild fish. PWSAC harvested 227,000 sockeye salmon for cost recovery and broodstock. The Eshamy District commercial harvest of 117,000 chum and 115,000 pink salmon were 7% and 0% wild fish, respectively.

UNAKWIK DISTRICT

The Unakwik District fishery primarily targets sockeye salmon returning to Miners Lake. Unakwik District commercial harvest was 18,900 sockeye salmon which was more than two and a half times the 10-year (2013–2022) average of 7,500 sockeye salmon.

PORT CHALMERS SUBDISTRICT

The drift gillnet gear group had exclusive access to the forecasted Port Chalmers chum salmon run of 650,000 fish. The Montague District drift gillnet chum salmon harvest was 1.23 million fish, 89% above forecast. The proportion of wild chum salmon in the Port Chalmers Subdistrict drift gillnet fishery was 3% of the harvest.

PURSE SEINE FISHERIES

CHUM SALMON

The 2023 chum salmon total run forecast was 3.44 million fish, with an estimated commercial harvest forecast of 2.30 million fish. Most of the total run, 3.04 million fish (89%), were from PWSAC hatchery production, with 190,000 fish returning to the Armin F. Koernig hatchery (AFK) and 650,000 fish returning to Port Chalmers Subdistrict drift gillnet fisheries. Based on the department's wild stock chum salmon forecast of 389,000 fish, there was a potential commercial harvest of 197,000 wild chum salmon.

Chum salmon commercial harvest in PWS was 3.79 million fish, 65% above the preseason harvest forecast of 2.30 million fish. The commercial purse seine fleet harvested 992,000 chum salmon in 2023. Approximately 171,000 AFK chum salmon were harvested in the PWS commercial fishery, 11% below the preseason forecast of 190,000 fish. The preliminary wild stock chum salmon harvest was 779,000 fish compared to the preseason harvest estimate of 197,000 fish. Chum salmon escapement was met in Eastern and Northern Districts and was below the SEG in Coghill, Northwestern, and Southeastern Districts. Poor weather conditions impacted aerial surveys and prevented later season surveys to the districts that did not make the SEG.

PINK SALMON

The 2023 pink salmon total run forecast for PWS was 64.81 million fish, composed of 20.38 million VFDA hatchery fish, 24.20 million PWSAC hatchery fish, and 20.32 million wild fish. Approximately 3.74 million (18%) of VFDA's pink salmon preseason forecast was projected for cost recovery and broodstock, with the remaining 16.65 million VFDA fish expected to be available for commercial harvest. Approximately 3.92 million (16%) of PWSAC's pink salmon preseason forecast was projected for cost recovery and broodstock, with the remaining 20.28 million PWSAC fish expected to be available for commercial harvest. Based on the department's wild stock pink salmon forecast, there was a potential commercial harvest of 18.39 million fish. Taking into consideration both VFDA and PWSAC's cost recovery and broodstock needs and an SEG midpoint of 1.84 million wild pink salmon, approximately 55.32 million pink salmon were expected to be available for commercial harvest.

The 2023 commercial harvest of 46.28 million pink salmon was 19% below the 55.32 million commercial harvest forecast. The pink salmon commercial harvest was composed of an estimated 17.34 million VFDA fish, 17.69 million PWSAC fish, and 11.25 million wild fish. The PWS purse seine commercial salmon harvest was 46.96 million fish composed of 45.88 million pink, 994,000 chum, 74,600 sockeye, 18,600 coho, and 400 Chinook salmon. The total pink salmon harvest was 58.09 million fish including 11.80 million fish for hatchery cost recovery and broodstock (3.20 million for VFDA and 8.60 million for PWSAC); an increase in the amount of fish needed for PWSAC cost-recovery was due to a decrease in pink salmon price compared to pre-season price assumptions. The preliminary VFDA pink salmon run of 20.51 million fish was 3% above the forecast of 20.38 million fish. The preliminary PWSAC pink salmon run of 27.56 million fish was 14% above the forecast of 24.20 million fish. The PWS wild pink salmon harvest of 11.25 million fish was 39% below the harvest forecast of 18.39 million fish. Both VFDA and PWSAC achieved their respective pink salmon egg-take goals at all facilities.

In August, PWS purse seine fisheries were impacted by the statewide salmon market collapse. This resulted in a quality-driven market where processors only bought fish from certain areas based on flesh quality, and adjusted prices accordingly. The season ended on August 26 when all processors stopped buying purse seine-caught salmon, this abrupt closure was about 5 days earlier than anticipated; typically, processors quit buying fish on or around September 1.

Pink salmon escapement was estimated for 8 districts; 5 of those districts were within the odd-year SEG ranges, 2 of those districts were above the odd-year SEG, and 1 district (Southeastern District) was below the lower end of the odd-year SEG.

COHO SALMON

The 2023 VFDA enhanced coho salmon forecast was 80,000 fish, with a forecasted commercial harvest of 35,000. The total commercial purse seine harvest of coho salmon in PWS was 18,600 fish, with a harvest of 5,520 in the Eastern District.

Table 1.–Preliminary Area E salmon harvest, 2023.

District	Chinook	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
Bering River	43	11,440	21,941	126	136	33,686
Copper River	10,432	855,202	120,139	17,879	19,621	1,023,273
Eastern	317	16,300	5,516	20,492,721	633,936	21,148,790
Northern	38	8,557	2,686	7,593,997	46,404	7,651,682
Coghill	168	231,511	6,537	1,393,174	1,505,353	3,136,743
Northwestern	0	2,055	21	332,037	4,341	338,454
Eshamy	37	505,154	960	115,069	117,278	738,498
Southwestern	28	39,281	8,768	14,229,110	199,754	14,476,941
Montague	169	26,747	1,407	1,573,010	1,242,932	2,844,265
Southeastern	3	314	169	541,494	18,332	560,312
Unakwik	7	18,914	0	539	241	19,701
Commercial Total	11,242	1,715,475	168,144	46,289,156	3,788,328	51,972,345
Hatchery						
Solomon Gulch	44	633	16	3,201,879	4,247	3,206,819
Cannery Creek	0	0	0	2,526,988	0	2,526,988
Wally Noerenberg	0	0	0	1,496,807	1,342,236	2,839,043
Main Bay	0	227,046	0	0	31	227,077
Armin F. Koernig	0	0	0	4,573,963	0	4,573,963
Hatchery Total ^a	44	227,679	16	11,799,637	1,346,514	13,373,890
PWS Total Harvest	11,286	1,943,154	168,160	58,088,793	5,134,842	65,346,235

^a Hatchery harvest to meet cost recovery and broodstock needs.