



Advisory Announcement
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CONTACT: Kevin Clark or Luke Henslee
Kotzebue Area and Asst. Area Manager
(907) 443-5167 (800) 560-2271

2026 KOTZEBUE SOUND SALMON MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK

INTRODUCTION

The Kotzebue District salmon fisheries management outlook is to inform fishermen, processors, and other interested parties of the management strategies for the commercial salmon fishery. The Kotzebue District includes all waters from Cape Prince of Wales to Point Hope. The Kotzebue District is divided into three subdistricts. Subdistrict 2, near the mouth of the Noatak River is closed to commercial fishing by regulation. Most fishing occurs in Subdistrict 1, which is subdivided into six statistical areas to help managers determine catch location (Figure 1). Within the Kotzebue District, chum salmon *Oncorhynchus keta* are the most abundant anadromous fish. Other salmon species (Chinook *O. tshawytscha*, pink *O. gorbuscha*, coho *O. kisutch*, and sockeye salmon *O. nerka*) occur in small numbers, as do Dolly Varden *Salvelinus malma*, and sheefish (inconnu) *Stenodus leucichthys*.

2026 RUN OUTLOOK

The outlook for the 2026 season is based on the parent-year returns and returning age classes observed in the commercial catch samples obtained in 2025. During the 2025 season, the salmon return was below average and the 2026 return is expected to mirror that weakness but may improve to some extent. The 4-year-old abundance in 2026 is expected to be slightly better than in 2025 based on the percentage of 3-years olds in the 2025 commercial harvest. 3-year-olds accounted for 11.6% of the commercial harvest sampled compared to the long-term average of 7.7% and may indicate a stronger cohort than in recent years. The majority of the commercial harvest in 2025 consisted of 4-year-olds (71.8%). It is expected that the 5-year-old component of harvest to be above average (32.8% historically) based on the 4-year-old return last season and may be slightly more abundant than in 2025. The 3-year-old and 6-year-old age classes are generally minimal components of the run and not expected to influence overall harvest significantly. The commercial harvest is expected to fall within the range of 50,000 to 150,000 chum salmon.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The fishery is scheduled to open by regulation on July 10 and close August 31, unless extended by emergency order. The department expects there will be buyers this year with operations likely ceasing prior to the regulatory closure date.

Primary commercial fishery management objectives are to provide adequate chum salmon passage through the commercial fishery. Those are to ensure sustained runs by allowing adequate escapement and to meet subsistence harvest needs. Fishery management will be dependent on comparing period and cumulative season catch rates to historical data. Age composition of commercial salmon catches will be monitored to determine the strength of age classes in the run.

During the first week of the fishery, there are expected to be daily 8-hour fishing periods, except Saturday. Effort is expected to be minimal during these initial openings in the Kotzebue District as most fishermen do not start until catches start building. If harvest rates are weaker than expected the department may reduce fishing time in the

following weeks or forgo commercial harvest to allow for escapement and subsistence needs. If commercial catches indicate adequate run strength, the department will allow commercial fishing to continue while ensuring subsistence needs are met based on local subsistence harvest reports.

In 2025, the department scheduled a total of 24 commercial fishing periods that ranged from 8 to 12 hours per period. Initially, commercial periods were scheduled for 8 hours 4 days per week for the first 10 openings. Harvest rates for these openings were below average. Fishing time was reduced to 3 days per week and increased to 9 hours per day on July 27. Effort remained below average and catch rates showed limited improvement compared to the previous weeks. The fishery was opened for 2 periods per week for 12 and then 9 hours to allow fishermen to fish with optimum tidal conditions to maximize the potential CPUE; however, catch rates did not show significant improvement. The final commercial openings in 2024 occurred on August 26 and 27 with 9-hour openings per day. Catch rates continued to be poor and no additional commercial periods were announced in 2025.

No subsistence fishing restrictions are expected in 2026.

ESCAPEMENT OBJECTIVES

Inseason escapement-based management will consist of commercial catch rates and reports from subsistence fishermen.

Management strategies provide for escapement within sustainable escapement goal ranges (SEG) for each river system. These ranges, developed in 2018, are based on an analysis of historical harvest and escapement information of specific index areas within major drainages. These aerial survey escapement objectives are: (1) subject to continued review, (2) intended to evaluate escapement trends between years, and (3) are not a total count of the salmon escapement. The department intends to renew aerial surveys on the Noatak and upper Kobuk Rivers, which have not been flown in the Kotzebue District since 2014. The chum salmon escapement goals are as follows: Noatak River (mouth to Kelly Bar, including the Eli River) 43,000–92,800 fish, and upper Kobuk River and Selby River 12,000–32,100 fish.

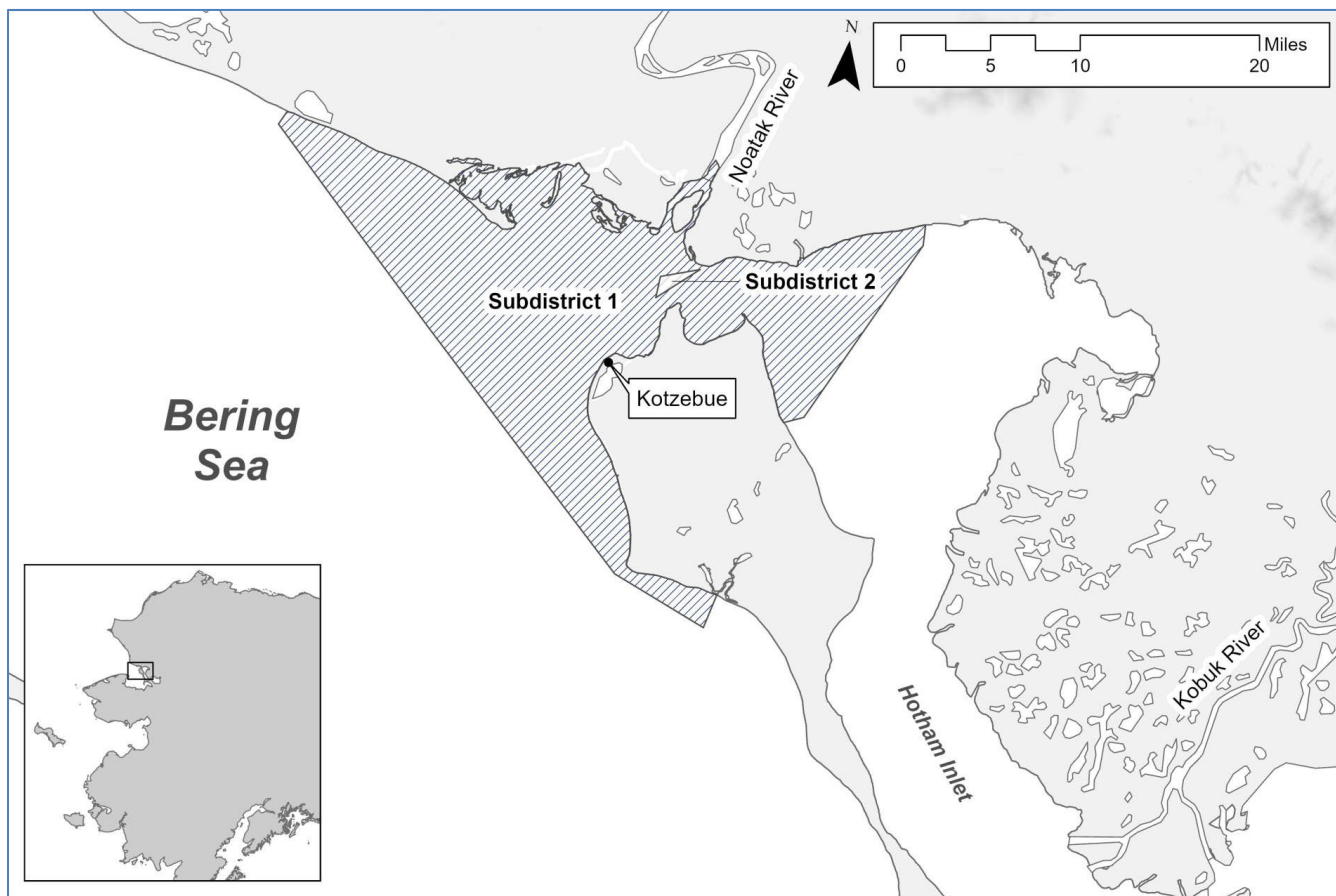


Figure 1.—Kotzebue Sound salmon subdistricts.