ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES
NEWS RELEASE

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2015 UPPER COOK INLET COMMERCIAL SALMON FISHERY SEASON SUMMARY

The 2015 Upper Cook Inlet (UCI) commercial harvest of approximately 3.1 million salmon was 15% less than the recent 10-year average annual harvest of 3.7 million fish (Table 1). The estimated exvessel value of the 2015 harvest of approximately $24.0 million was 20% less than the previous 10-year average annual exvessel value of $29.8 million. While all five species of Pacific salmon are present in UCI, sockeye salmon are the most valuable, accounting for nearly 78% of the exvessel value in the commercial fishery since 1960, and more than 93% of the total value during the past 20 years.

Currently, there are seven sockeye salmon systems with escapement/inriver goals that are monitored in UCI (Table 2). Sonar is used to estimate sockeye salmon passage in the Kenai and Kasilof rivers, while weirs are operated at Larson, Chelatna, Judd, and Big (Fish Creek) lakes. Remote video technology was utilized to evaluate the sustainable escapement goal (SEG) at Packers Lake. For the 2015 season, three of seven sockeye salmon enumeration estimates fell within the established goal ranges, while estimates in the other four systems exceeded their goal objectives (Table 2).

SOCKEYE SALMON

2015 Run Summary

The total sockeye salmon run to UCI in 2015 was estimated to be approximately 6.3 million fish, which was 7% more than forecast (Table 3). Based on Anchor Point offshore test fishery (OTF) data, the mid-point of 2015 sockeye salmon run occurred on July 25, which is the latest mid-point of the run ever estimated using OTF data. The latest run on record had previously occurred in 2006, when the mid-point of the run occurred on July 24. The Kenai and Kasilof rivers sockeye salmon runs were moderately higher than forecast, while the Susitna River and Fish Creek runs were well above forecast. The number of sockeye salmon returning to all other systems (minor systems) was approximately 150,000 less fish than forecast. The UCI commercial harvest of nearly 2.6 million sockeye salmon was approximately 17% less than the 2005–2014 average annual harvest of 3.1 million fish and ranks as the 6th lowest harvest in the past 10 years.

Sockeye salmon prices varied during the season, but based on an estimated average price of $1.60 per pound, the total exvessel value from the 2015 UCI sockeye salmon harvest was approximately $22.0 million, which was 92% of the total UCI exvessel value.

Upper Subdistrict Set Gillnet and Central District Drift Gillnet

The 2015 UCI preseason forecast was for a total run of approximately 5.8 million sockeye salmon (Table 3), with a harvest estimate (sport, personal use and commercial) of 3.7 million fish. Approximately 2.9 million sockeye salmon were predicted to be harvested commercially. The total run to the Kenai River, generally the largest producer in UCI, was forecasted to be nearly 3.6 million sockeye salmon. For Kenai River runs of 2.3 million–4.6 million fish, the inriver sonar goal range is 1.0 million–1.2 million sockeye salmon.

The Kasilof Section set gillnet fishery opens by regulation on or after June 25; however, the section may open anytime from June 20–24 if the department projects that 50,000 sockeye salmon have entered the Kasilof River by that date. More than 50,000 sockeye salmon had passed the Kasilof River sonar site by midnight of June 20, but due to concerns over Kenai River early-run king salmon escapement levels, the fishery was not opened until June 22 to allow for additional king salmon escapement into the Kenai River. The Kenai River early-run king salmon sport fishery was closed for the entire season. The final escapement of Kenai River early-run king salmon (June 30 is the final day of enumeration for the early run) was estimated at 6,190 fish, which meant the optimum escapement goal (OEG) of 5,300–9,000 fish was achieved.

At the 2014 Alaska Board of Fisheries meeting (board), the *Kenai River Late-Run King Salmon Management Plan* was modified to include specific "paired" restrictions to sport and commercial fisheries during periods of low king salmon abundance. The modified plan stated that from July 1 through July 31, if the projected inriver run of Kenai River late-run king salmon is less than 22,500 fish, the Kenai River king salmon sport fishery may be restricted to no bait, retention of king salmon may be restricted in the Kenai River personal use fishery, and the set gillnet fishery may be restricted to no more than 36 hours of fishing time per week with regular Monday/Thursday 12-hour fishing periods no longer in effect. If retention of king salmon is prohibited in the sport fishery, the set gillnet fishery is restricted to no more than 12 hours of fishing time per week.

The preseason forecast for 2015 Kenai River late-run king salmon was for a total run of approximately 22,000 fish. Based on this projection, the sport fishery in the Kenai River began the season on July 1 under a no-bait restriction and the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery was restricted to fishing no more than 36 hours per week without regular Monday/Thursday fishing periods. Both fisheries remained in this restricted mode through July 24. Based on a king salmon passage estimate of more than 13,000 fish through July 24, the no-bait restriction in the sport fishery was removed beginning on Saturday, July 25. In turn, this meant that the 36-hour weekly restriction in the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery was also removed beginning on July 25.

Beginning August 1, a different provision within the *Kenai River Late-Run King Salmon Management Plan* went into effect. It stated that from August 1 through August 15, if the projected escapement of king salmon into the Kenai River is at least 16,500 fish, but less than 22,500 fish, the set gillnet fishery in the Upper Subdistrict was to be limited to no more than 36 hours of fishing time. So, beginning on August 1, daily passage estimates of king salmon into the Kenai River were assessed so that projections of the final escapement could be made. From

July 26 through August 4, Kenai River king salmon escapement projections declined each day. Based on a cumulative passage estimate of 18,136 king salmon through August 4, it was no longer certain that the final escapement would make or exceed 22,500 fish. Thus, beginning on Thursday, August 6, the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery was to be limited to fishing no more than 36 hours for the remainder of the month. This change also eliminated the regular Monday and Thursday fishing schedule. At the same time, king salmon escapement data was also viewed in relationship to strong sockeye salmon passage in both the Kenai and Kasilof rivers.

During the 2015 season, the Kasilof River Special Harvest Area (KRSHA) was fished on part or all of 21 different days. In addition, for the first time ever, the Kasilof Section opened in those waters only within 600 feet of the mean high tide mark; this occurred during a portion of six days during the season. Fishing in this area was employed in an attempt to harvest Kasilof bound sockeye salmon, while attempting to reduce the harvest of Kenai River king salmon. Between June 22 and August 10, the Kasilof Section was open to set gillnetting one day within one-half mile of the mean high tide mark and during a portion of 27 different days in the full section. From July 9 through August 13, the Kenai and East Foreland sections were open for a portion of 20 different days. For the 2015 season, the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery (excluding the KRSHA), harvested 6,666 king and 1,357,136 sockeye salmon. An additional 452 king and 124,354 sockeye salmon were harvested by set and drift gillnetters in the KRSHA.

The final Kenai River king salmon passage estimate for the 2015 season was approximately 23,705 fish, and after inriver mortality above the sonar was subtracted, the final estimate of escapement was approximately 22,600 fish. The cumulative sockeye salmon passage estimate in the Kasilof River, which was enumerated through August 14, was approximately 470,000 fish[1]. In the Kenai River, the final estimate of sockeye salmon passage, based on enumeration through August 26, was more than 1.7 million fish[1].

In 2014, the board made substantive changes to the *Central District Drift Gillnet Fishery Management Plan*, confining the drift fleet primarily to the east-side of the Central District during the latter half of July. In this region, the board created a new drift gillnet fishing area, the Anchor Point Section, that included those waters from the Ninilchik River south to the Anchor River (Figure 1). During the month of July, the drift fleet fished a total of 26 days as follows: one day in the regular Kasilof Section; two days in the Expanded Kenai/Kasilof sections; seven days in the Expanded Kenai/Kasilof and Anchor Point sections; 10 days in the KRSHA; four days in Drift Area 1; and two days in all of the Central District (July 2nd and 6th). Due to the lateness of this year's sockeye salmon run, the drift fleet also fished six district-wide periods in the first 13 days of August. For the 2015 season, approximately 992,000 sockeye salmon were harvested by the drift fleet, which represented 38% of the total UCI sockeye salmon harvest.

In summary, the 2015 UCI sockeye salmon run was the latest run on record. The 2015 season was also unusual in that peak daily harvest rates in both the Central District drift fishery and Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery were the lowest on record (since 1985). For example, the 2015 peak daily harvest (catch per boat) in the drift fishery during non-corridor openings of 283 sockeye salmon per boat was the lowest CPUE ever measured in the drift fleet. Similarly, in the

[1] Sonar estimate at river mile 19 on Kenai River and river mile 8 on Kasilof River; not escapement. Harvest upstream of sonar must be subtracted to estimate escapement. Sport harvest estimated from Statewide Harvest Survey; results for 2015 available fall of 2016 at the earliest.

Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery, the peak daily harvest in 2015 of 95,000 sockeye salmon represented the lowest peak daily harvest ever measured (2012 was not considered because the entire Upper Subdistrict only fished one day in July that year). In other words, the 2015 sockeye salmon run can be characterized as very protracted and never experienced a significant build-up of fish in either the Central District drift or in the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fisheries. Finally, the average weight of sockeye salmon captured in the 2015 UCI commercial fishery was the second smallest on record at 5.3 lb/fish, with the 2006 average size of 5.1 lbs/fish as the smallest.

Western Subdistrict

By regulation, the Western Subdistrict set gillnet fishery opened for regular periods on Thursday, June 18. This fishery primarily harvests sockeye salmon returning to the Crescent River. The Crescent River sonar program was discontinued in 2014. In 2015, sockeye salmon harvest rates in the set gillnet fishery from the beaches near the Crescent River area were consistent with historic harvest rates when this fishery had been provided additional fishing time due to increased sockeye salmon passage into Crescent River. Therefore, an emergency order was issued on July 11 opening that portion of the Western Subdistrict south of the latitude of Redoubt Point from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays each week from July 13 through August 10. Approximately 34,500 sockeye salmon were harvested by setnetters in the Western Subdistrict in 2015.

Kustatan Subdistrict

The Kustatan Subdistrict includes those waters from the Drift River terminal to the Northern District boundary near the West Forelands. From 1993–2014, approximately 9 permit holders per year have reported harvest from this area. The majority of participation and harvest (more than 92% of the harvest) typically comes from the Big River sockeye salmon fishery, which is an early season fishery limited to one net per permit holder and occurs from June 1 through June 24. Approximately 2,200 sockeye salmon were harvested in the Kustatan Subdistrict in 2015, with nearly 1,500 of these caught during the Big River fishery.

Kalgin Island Subdistrict

The Kalgin Island Subdistrict opened for regular fishing periods beginning June 25; however, the west side of Kalgin Island was open for commercial fishing on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from June 1–24 as part of the Big River sockeye salmon fishery. In 2015, approximately 60,000 sockeye salmon were harvested from the Kalgin Island Subdistrict, with nearly 5,600 of those fish taken during the Big River sockeye salmon fishery. The average annual sockeye salmon harvest on Kalgin Island during the previous 10 years was approximately 62,000 fish, with approximately 14,000 of those fish harvested during the early season Big River fishery. Based upon a video weir assessment of sockeye salmon escapement into Packers Lake, which projected a final escapement within the SEG range of 15,000–30,000 fish, three additional 12-hour fishing periods were provided in the Kalgin Island Subdistrict on the first three Saturdays in August (August 1, 8, and 15). According to 5 AAC 21.370 *Packers Creek Sockeye Salmon Management Plan*, for the purpose of harvesting Packers Creek sockeye salmon, extra fishing time in the Kalgin Island Subdistrict shall be limited to no more than one additional fishing period per week.

Northern District

Commercial fishing in the Northern District opened on June 1 for the directed king salmon fishery (see king salmon section below) and for regular periods beginning on June 25. In 2015, approximately 56,000 sockeye salmon were harvested in the Northern District, with about 1,900 of these fish harvested during the four directed king salmon fishing periods. The 2015 sockeye salmon harvest was 97% greater than the 2005–2014 average of 28,274 sockeye salmon, yet approximately 35% less than the 1966–2014 average of more than 85,000 fish.

COHO SALMON

The 2015 UCI harvest estimate of more than 211,000 coho salmon in all commercial fisheries was approximately 24% greater than the recent 10-year (2005–2014) average annual harvest of approximately 171,000 fish (Table 1). The 2015 drift gillnet harvest of 127,000 coho salmon was 25% greater than the recent 10-year average of approximately 101,000 fish.

In UCI, there are two coho salmon systems with escapement goals that are monitored inseason with weirs, Fish Creek and the Little Susitna River. The goal at Fish Creek is an SEG of 1,200-4,400 fish. Coho salmon escapement was enumerated at the Fish Creek weir from July 13 through September 27 and produced a final count of 7,370 fish. In the Little Susitna River, the goal is an SEG of 10,100–17,700 fish. Coho salmon escapement was enumerated at the Little Susitna weir from July 6 through August 27, producing an escapement estimate of 12,421 fish. Finally, there is a coho salmon foot survey SEG of 450–700 fish at McRobert's Creek, which drains into Jim Creek, both located in the Knik River drainage. A foot survey conducted late in September found 571 coho salmon in the stream, which was within the SEG range for this system. Therefore, all coho salmon escapement goals in Northern Cook Inlet were met or exceeded in 2015.

Based on an average price per pound of $0.60, the estimated exvessel value of the 2015 commercial coho salmon fishery was approximately $752,000, or 3.1% of the total exvessel value in Upper Cook Inlet. This was approximately 9% higher than the recent 10-year (2005-2014) exvessel value of $692,000 for coho salmon in UCI.

PINK SALMON

Pink salmon runs in UCI are even-year dominant, with odd-year average annual harvests typically less than one-sixth of even-year harvests. The 2015 UCI commercial harvest of pink salmon was estimated to be approximately 47,000 fish, which was 43% less than the average annual harvest of nearly 83,000 fish from the previous 10-years of odd-year harvests (Table 1). Using an average weight of 3.3lb/fish and an average price of $0.25/lb, the estimated exvessel value for the 2015 pink salmon harvest was $39,000, or 0.2% of the total exvessel value.

CHUM SALMON

The 2015 harvest of approximately 269,000 chum salmon was more than double the previous 10-year average annual harvest of nearly 123,000 fish (Table 1) and represents the highest chum salmon harvest since 1995. There is only one chum salmon escapement goal in UCI, which is an aerial survey SEG of 3,800–8,400 fish in Clearwater Creek, the major tributary that drains into Chinitna Bay. Nearly 11,000 chum salmon were observed during an August 14 survey flight. Based on this escapement estimate, Chinitna Bay was opened to set and drift gillnetting for 12-hour fishing periods on Tuesdays and Fridays beginning on Tuesday, August 18. The

exvessel value of chum salmon in the 2015 commercial fishery was approximately $729,000 or 3.0% of the total exvessel value in UCI.

KING SALMON

In UCI, there are two commercial fisheries where the majority of king salmon are harvested: the set gillnet fisheries in the Northern District and in the Upper Subdistrict of the Central District. King salmon runs were again expected to be below average in watersheds throughout Southcentral Alaska during the 2015 season. Therefore, similar to recent years, it was anticipated that restrictions to both sport and commercial fisheries would be required to ensure that escapement objectives were achieved. In the Northern District, many king salmon stocks were classified as stocks of management concern by the board in 2011. An action plan was developed which aimed to reduce king salmon harvest in both sport and commercial fisheries. In the commercial fishery, beginning in 2011, that portion of the General Subdistrict of the Northern District, from approximately one and one-half miles south of Tyonek north to the Susitna River was closed to fishing during the directed king salmon fishery. From 2012–2014, the department determined that additional restrictions were necessary to further reduce king salmon commercial harvest. These additional restrictions included closing the first Monday fishing period of the season and reducing time in the remaining fishing periods from 12-hours to 6-hours. This same strategy was followed in 2015. The first fishing period of the year, which was scheduled for Monday, May 25, was closed and the remaining four fishing periods were reduced to 6-hours by emergency order. However, the department determined during the season that the Deshka River king salmon escapement goal would be achieved, and as a result, the use of bait and multiple hooks was allowed back into the sport fishery beginning Saturday, June 13. In response to this, the last two set gillnet fishing periods, those on June 15 and 22, were returned to 12-hours in duration. The estimated king salmon harvest in the Northern District directed fishery was approximately 1,467 fish, or about 35% less than the previous 10-year average annual harvest of 2,269 fish.

The Deshka River is the primary system in northern Cook Inlet where king salmon escapement has been monitored inseason with a weir. The 2015 Deshka River king salmon escapement estimate of 24,316 fish was within the escapement goal range of 13,000–28,000 fish and represented the highest escapement since 2006.

In response to below average Kenai River king salmon runs in recent years, the board substantially modified the *Kenai River Late-Run King Salmon Management Plan* at the 2014 UCI finfish meeting. The newly modified plan significantly changed management of the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery in years of low king salmon abundance (please see the sockeye salmon section of this document for a description of restrictive actions taken in the Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery to conserve Kenai River king salmon).

The 2015 Upper Subdistrict set gillnet fishery king salmon harvest was estimated to be 6,666 fish. This does not include king salmon harvested in the KRSHA, where approximately 371 king salmon were harvested by the set gillnet fishery and an additional 81 kings were taken by the drift fishery. Thus, the 2015 total king salmon harvest by setnetters in the Upper Subdistrict was 7,037 fish. The stock composition of the 2015 harvest will not be known until genetic samples collected during the fishery are processed by the department's Gene Conservation Laboratory (http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=fishinggeneconservationlab.main). As noted in the

sockeye salmon section of this document, the 2015 Kenai River late-run king salmon escapement estimate was approximately 22,600 fish; which is within the SEG of 15,000–30,000 fish.

In all of UCI, approximately 9,870 king salmon were harvested in 2015, which was approximately 17% less than the previous 10-year (2005–2014) average annual harvest of 11,914 fish (Table 1). Using a price of $2.00 per pound for king salmon, the estimated exvessel value of the 2015 harvest was $335,000. This value was approximately 1.4% of the total UCI commercial fishery.

Table 1.–Upper Cook Inlet commercial salmon harvest by species, 1966–2015.

Year	Chinook	Sockeye	Coho	Pink	Chum	Total
1966	8,544	1,852,114	289,837	2,005,745	532,756	4,688,996
1967	7,859	1,380,062	177,729	32,229	296,837	1,894,716
1968	4,536	1,104,904	469,850	2,278,197	1,119,114	4,976,601
1969	12,397	692,175	100,777	33,383	269,847	1,108,579
1970	8,336	732,605	275,399	814,895	776,229	2,607,464
1971	19,765	636,303	100,636	35,624	327,029	1,119,357
1972	16,086	879,824	80,933	628,574	630,103	2,235,520
1973	5,194	670,098	104,420	326,184	667,573	1,773,469
1974	6,596	497,185	200,125	483,730	396,840	1,584,476
1975	4,787	684,752	227,379	336,333	951,796	2,205,047
1976	10,865	1,664,150	208,695	1,256,728	469,802	3,610,240
1977	14,790	2,052,291	192,599	553,855	1,233,722	4,047,257
1978	17,299	2,621,421	219,193	1,688,442	571,779	5,118,134
1979	13,738	924,415	265,166	72,982	650,357	1,926,658
1980	13,798	1,573,597	271,418	1,786,430	389,675	4,034,918
1981	12,240	1,439,277	484,411	127,164	833,542	2,896,634
1982	20,870	3,259,864	793,937	790,648	1,433,866	6,299,185
1983	20,634	5,049,733	516,322	70,327	1,114,858	6,771,874
1984	10,062	2,106,714	449,993	617,452	680,726	3,864,947
1985	24,088	4,060,429	667,213	87,828	772,849	5,612,407
1986	39,256	4,792,072	757,353	1,300,958	1,134,817	8,024,456
1987	39,440	9,469,248	449,750	109,389	349,150	10,416,977
1988	29,080	6,843,833	561,048	471,080	710,615	8,615,656
1989	26,738	5,011,159	339,931	67,443	122,051	5,567,322
1990	16,105	3,604,710	501,739	603,630	351,197	5,077,381
1991	13,542	2,178,797	426,498	14,663	280,230	2,913,730
1992	17,171	9,108,353	468,930	695,861	274,303	10,564,618
1993	18,871	4,755,344	306,882	100,934	122,770	5,304,801
1994	19,962	3,565,609	583,793	523,434	303,177	4,995,975
1995	17,893	2,952,096	447,130	133,578	529,428	4,080,125
1996	14,306	3,888,922	321,668	242,911	156,520	4,624,327
1997	13,292	4,176,995	152,408	70,945	103,036	4,516,676
1998	8,124	1,219,517	160,688	551,737	95,704	2,035,770
1999	14,383	2,680,518	126,105	16,176	174,554	3,011,736
2000	7,350	1,322,482	236,871	146,482	127,069	1,840,254
2001	9,295	1,826,851	113,311	72,560	84,494	2,106,511
2002	12,714	2,773,118	246,281	446,960	237,949	3,717,022
2003	18,503	3,476,161	101,756	48,789	120,767	3,765,976
2004	26,922	4,927,084	311,058	357,939	146,165	5,769,168
2005	27,667	5,238,699	224,657	48,419	69,740	5,609,182
2006	18,029	2,192,730	177,853	404,111	64,033	2,856,756
2007	17,625	3,316,779	177,339	147,020	77,240	3,736,003
2008	13,333	2,380,135	171,869	169,368	50,315	2,785,020
2009	8,750	2,045,794	153,210	214,321	82,811	2,504,886
2010	9,900	2,828,342	207,350	292,706	228,863	3,567,161
2011	11,248	5,277,995	95,291	34,123	129,407	5,548,064
2012	2,527	3,133,839	106,775	469,598	269,733	3,982,472
2013	5,398	2,683,224	260,963	48,275	139,365	3,137,225
2014	4,660	2,343,032	137,200	642,754	116,083	3,243,729
2015[a]	9,870	2,598,550	211,857	47,259	269,440	3,136,976
1966-2014 Avg	14,991	2,936,640	294,321	458,631	423,896	4,128,479
2005-2014 Avg	11,914	3,144,057	171,251	247,070	122,759	3,697,050

[a]2015 data are preliminary.

Table 2.–Upper Cook Inlet sockeye salmon goals and passage (or counts), 2015.

System	2015 Estimate	Goal Type[a]	Lower Goal	Upper Goal
Kenai River	1,704,767[b]	Inriver	1,000,000	1,200,000
		SEG	700,000	1,200,000
		OEG	700,000	1,400,000
Kasilof River	470,667[b]	BEG	160,000	340,000[c]
		OEG	160,000	390,000
Larson Lake	23,214	SEG	15,000	50,000
Chelatna Lake	69,750	SEG	20,000	65,000
Judd Lake	47,684	SEG	25,000	55,000
Fish Creek	102,296	SEG	20,000	70,000
Packers Creek	20,000[d]	SEG	15,000	30,000

[a] BEG=Biological Escapement Goal, SEG=Sustainable Escapement Goal, OEG=Optimum Escapement Goal, and Inriver=Inriver Goal.

[b] Sonar estimate at river mile 19 on Kenai River and river mile 8 on Kasilof River; not escapement. Harvest upstream of sonar must be subtracted to estimate escapement. Sport harvest estimated from Statewide Harvest Survey; results for 2015 available spring of 2016 at the earliest.

[c] The Kasilof River goal in 2015 was a biological escapement goal (BEG) of 160,000 to 340,000.

[d] 2015 escapement is an estimate; final escapement will not be known until video data from the weir are processed.

Table 3.–Upper Cook Inlet sockeye salmon forecast versus actual run by river system, 2015.

System	Forecast	Actual	Difference
Kenai River	3,550,000	3,828,000	8%
Kasilof River	1,092,000	1,177,000	8%
Susitna River	276,000	427,000	55%
Fish Creek	61,000	121,000	98%
Minor Systems	851,000	702,000	-18%
Overall Total	5,830,000	6,255,000	7%

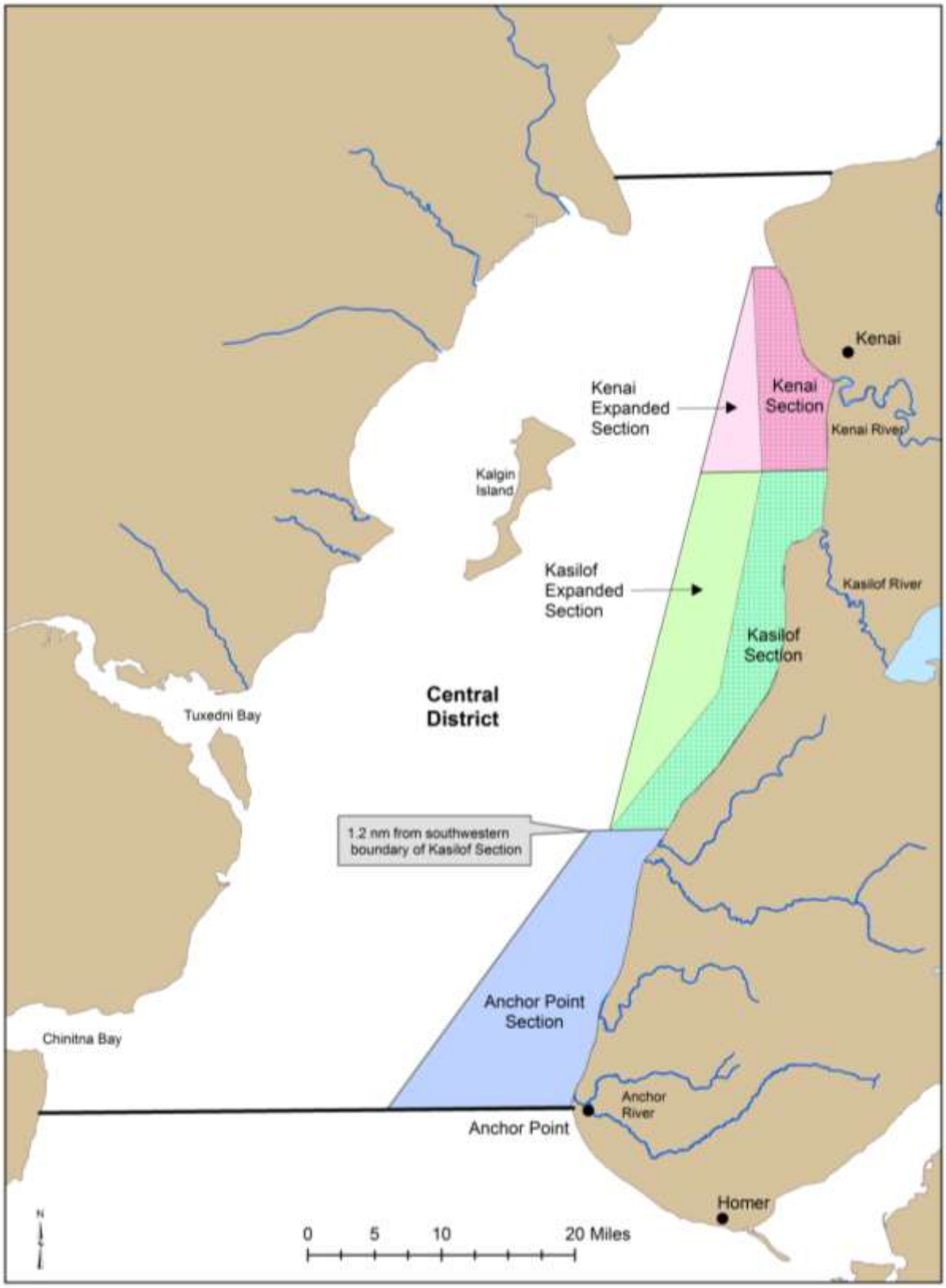

Figure 1.–Map of drift gillnet "corridor" boundaries, including the Kenai and Kasilof sections, Expanded Kenai and Expanded Kasilof sections, and the Anchor Point Section.