



September 29, 2022

John Jensen
Chair
Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
BycatchReview@alaska.gov

Re: SalmonState Comments on Management Recommendations for Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force

Dear Chair Jensen and Task Force members,

Please accept these comments from SalmonState. SalmonState is an Alaska-based effort focused on ensuring Alaska remains a place where wild salmon and the people who depend on them thrive. We want to thank you for undertaking the task of reviewing bycatch in Alaska and providing recommendations to both the State of Alaska Governor Dunleavy and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. SalmonState has been engaged in the Council's public process regarding Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) limits for the Bering Sea Aleutian Island and Gulf of Alaska walleye pollock fishery set by the Council. We are gravely concerned with the status of Chinook and chum salmon in Western Alaska and how the Council disregards the requests of Tribal Governments and Alaskan small boat fishermen and coastal communities to address these issues. We ask you to include the management recommendations described herein within the Task Force's final report to Governor Dunleavy and the Council.

Alaska's federal and state fisheries and dependent fishing communities are adversely impacted by the Council's management decisions for the trawl fisheries. Western Alaska subsistence fishers, small boat (under 250 ft) direct fishery participants, and sport fishers have lost access and opportunity including losing entire fishing seasons due to declining runs of Chinook and chum salmon to their natal waters. In contrast, the pollock trawl fishery continues to harvest Chinook and chum salmon that originate from these same waters. These conservation measures disproportionately burden communities and fishers most dependent upon Chinook and chum salmon, which blatantly contradicts the purpose of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).

The current approach to report and record bycatch and set PSC limits does not consider the full impact of bycaught species on Alaskan communities and small boat direct target fishers. In addition, the trawl fisheries observer coverage is insufficient and has led to tremendous data gaps. We appreciate the efforts made to reduce bycatch, but more action is necessary. All species should have an abundance-based management of bycatch that results in time and area closures in

the event of bycatch overages. The Gulf of Alaska observer coverage on trawl vessels must be increased to ensure accurate data and compliance with the MSA. Without sufficient action, Alaska's fisheries and dependent communities will continue to suffer irreparable harm.

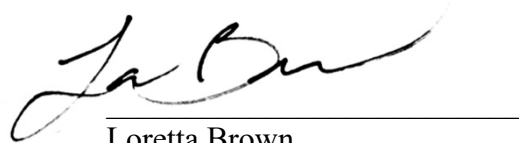
SalmonState requests the Task Force to recommend setting a more stringent limit on PSC allowable catch for Chinook salmon in both the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries. In addition, we request the Task Force to recommend setting a chum salmon PSC allowable catch cap that reflects a holistic and precautionary approach to limit the trawl fisheries' impact on the Western Alaska chum salmon runs. SalmonState recognizes that the issue of bycatch does not affect just Chinook and chum salmon but the status of halibut, crab, cod, and other fisheries. We also request the Task Force to recommend setting bycatch limits for all species that vary in abundance and result in meaningful reductions in bycatch waste.

The fisheries must be managed holistically. Just because the pollock population seems to be able to sustain status quo levels of harvest does not mean that the impacts to other species, habitats and communities can be ignored. Upriver returns and in-ocean abundance of non-target species as well as climate resilience and ecosystem impacts must all be weighed in management decisions.

Lastly, we do not support the approach of waiting to take action until more data is collected and analyzed. Scientists and local knowledge experts across the board are clear that our ocean ecosystems are in a state of drastic change and in some cases collapse. This level of fisheries disaster and ecosystem chaos requires immediate and decisive action on the factors that humans can control. Those factors include when, where, and how we allow fishing to occur. Please do not delay in taking action.

We appreciate the opportunity to offer our comments. Please see the attached recommendation letters by SalmonState from past years.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Loretta Brown', is positioned above a horizontal line.

Loretta Brown
Legal and Policy Analyst
SalmonState
loretta@salmonstate.org



June 3, 2022

Simon Kinneen, Chairman
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501

Jon Kurland, Regional Director
NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region
PO Box 21688
Juneau, AK 99802

Re: D1 Salmon Reports and E1 Staff Tasking

Dear Chairman Kinneen, Director Kurland, and Council Members,

Please accept these comments from SalmonState. SalmonState is an Alaska-based effort focused on making sure Alaska remains a place where wild salmon and the people who depend on them thrive. We appreciate the opportunity to offer our comments.

We submitted comments before this North Pacific Fishery Management Council (“Council”) in April 2021¹, expressing SalmonState’s concern with the declining Chinook salmon runs throughout Alaska’s waters. In those comments we expressed concern with the high take of Chinook salmon as bycatch from fisheries managed by NOAA Fisheries (“NMFS”) and with bycatch limits set through Council recommendations. Over a year ago, we requested that you reduce allowable bycatch of Chinook salmon to support conservation and management of critical salmon stocks to subsistence, sport, and direct target commercial fisheries. Since that time, little has changed in the Council recommendations to NMFS regarding Chinook bycatch, while Chinook populations continue to see low returns, access to these fish is closed to subsistence users on the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers, and the Alaska Board of Fisheries designated the Chickamin River, Stikine River, Andrew Creek, and Taku River Chinook runs as stocks of concern in Southeast Alaska.² On May 1, 2022, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (“ADF&G”) closed the Kuskokwim River to sport fishing for Chinook salmon due to the low

¹ SalmonState’s April 2021 comment letter is attached at the end of this letter for Council reference.

² <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=specialstatus.akfishstocks>

abundance forecast run for 2022³, the forecast is similar to the run in 2021, when low numbers lead to closure of all subsistence fishing for Chinook on the Kuskokwim River.

Furthermore, the number of chum salmon taken as bycatch by the pollock trawl fishery has increased to “considerably higher than the 10-year average.”⁴ Meanwhile, Western Alaska rivers have seen significant low return in number of chum salmon since 2019, a species important to direct target commercial fisheries and as a subsistence resource for communities of the region. ADF&G’s stock status report (D1a) submitted to this Council points out that “chum salmon traditionally constitute the majority of subsistence salmon harvest in the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim region” and that “in more interior communities of the larger river systems, Chinook and chum salmon are the only salmon species available.”⁵ Furthermore, ADF&G points out that “all Western Alaska areas had chum run sizes below recent year averages and many were some of the lowest in the historical database.”⁶ The chum salmon run declines in 2021 were even more extreme than 2020, “by far the poorest abundance ever documented.”⁷ In 2021, “Chum salmon fishing was closed in multiple areas including fall and summer chum salmon for all user groups (commercial, sport, and subsistence) on the Yukon River; commercial chum salmon fishing in the Kuskokwim River and Bay areas; and sport chum salmon fishing on the Kuskokwim River.”⁸ On May 31st of this year the Alaska Department of Fish and Game announced a closure for subsistence fishing of Chinook and chum species on the Yukon River due to low forecast return numbers comparable to 2021, that are “unlikely...to meet escapement objectives.”⁹

As such, SalmonState requests that the Council recommend, and NMFS set a more stringent limit on Prohibited Species Catch (“PSC”) allowable catch for Chinook salmon in both the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries. We also request that the Council recommends and NMFS sets a cap on chum salmon PSC allowable catch that reflects a precautionary approach to limit the impact of the trawl fishery on the Western Alaska chum salmon runs.

³ Emergency Order No. 3-KS-V-02-22, ADF&G, April 7, 2022. <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/Static-sf/EONR/PDFs/2022/R3/EO-3-KS-V-02-22%20KGMA.pdf>

⁴ Genetic Stock Composition Analysis of Chum Salmon from Prohibited Species Catch of the 2021 Bering Sea Walleye Pollock Trawl Fishery, NOAA Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, May 23, 2022. <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=247bfc4c-d7cd-4030-82ef-db503fbc342.pdf&fileName=D1b%20BS%20Chum%20Salmon%20Bycatch%20Genetics%20Report%202021.pdf>

⁵ Stock status summary for major Western Alaska chum salmon and Chinook salmon stocks, ADF&G, June 2022. <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=7bb8ba14-30b7-440f-8d79-57ebf95c5ca9.pdf&fileName=D1a%20ADFG%20WAK%20Chinook%20and%20chum%20stock%20status%20update.pdf>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ 2022 Yukon River Salmon Summer Fishery Announcement #4 Summer Update #1, Yukon Area Salmon Fishery, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, May 31, 2022. <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/applications/defnewsrelease/1376182623.pdf>

As part of an Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management approach to federal fisheries in Alaska waters, NMFS should set Chinook and Chum salmon bycatch limits (PSC caps) based on the best available science, and not the dictates of the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands offshore trawl fisheries.

As discussed above, Western Alaska subsistence fishers, small boat direct fishery participants, and sport fishermen have all foregone multiple fishing seasons upon which their livelihoods and food security depend upon due to declining runs of Chinook and chum salmon to their natal waterbodies. With Chinook and chum salmon run forecasts for 2022 reflecting the low abundance seen in 2021, all of these fisheries are likely to see another closed season. In this time, the pollock trawl fishery continues to harvest a significant number of Chinook and chum salmon originating from these same waters. The disproportionate burden of conservation measures on those communities and fishermen most dependent upon Chinook and chum salmon runs contradicts the purpose and directives of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

The manner in which Chinook and Chum salmon caught as bycatch are reported and recorded and PSC limits are set does not consider the full impact of those bycaught salmon on Alaska communities and small boat direct target salmon fishermen. Bycatch numbers are presented to convey fish taken as they relate to the pollock trawl fishery, rather than as the take relates to salmon abundance and regional runs. The total Chinook and chum salmon taken via bycatch by the pollock fishery, while an important and fact, does not sufficiently convey the impact of the take on the populations of Western Alaska salmon. To remedy this and better inform the Council and NMFS in setting PSC caps, bycatch numbers should also be reported as they relate to Western Alaska Chinook and chum salmon stocks, runs, and conservation measures taken by direct target fisheries including subsistence, sport, and commercial.

For example, in the 2020 Bering Sea Aleutian Islands pollock trawl season, a total of 32,294 Chinook salmon and 320,478 chum salmon were taken as bycatch. Of those salmon caught as bycatch, 16,796 Chinook originated from Western Alaska waterbodies, in a year when runs in the Nushagak River, Kuskokwim River, Yukon River, and Norton Sound were all below average, and almost none of the escapement goals were met.¹⁰ In 2020 and 2021, in those Western Alaska waterbodies, subsistence, and sport fishing were severely limited and commercial fisheries closed.¹¹ While 16,796 Chinook salmon are only a portion of the Chinook salmon PSC take for the BSAI pollock trawl fishery, that number far outstrips what was harvested by Western Alaska fishermen targeting Chinook. At a time when “Western Alaska Chinook salmon run sizes in 2020 and 2021 were the poorest observed over the past 40 years” the burden of conservation measures due to low abundance is disproportionately applied to these communities and fishermen of Western Alaska while the pollock trawl fleet enjoy full and lucrative seasons while contributing to the devastation of the Chinook population through bycatch. To remedy this injustice and distribute the burden of conservation measures accurately and fairly on fisheries that harvest salmon, trawler PSC caps should be lowered, and should be

¹⁰ <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=7bb8ba14-30b7-440f-8d79-57ebf95c5ca9.pdf&fileName=D1a%20ADFG%20WAK%20Chinook%20and%20chum%20stock%20status%20update.pdf>

¹¹ *Id.*

set based on the number of salmon originating from Western Alaska rather than the total number of salmon taken.

SalmonState is gravely concerned with the status of Chinook and chum salmon runs throughout Alaska. In the last few years, the Chinook and chum salmon runs have been historically low, resulting in a direct and devastating effect on communities along the Yukon and Kuskowkim Rivers that depend upon those fish for income, food and a foundation of their culture. Meanwhile, the trawl fleet continues to take these species as bycatch in high numbers. SalmonState requests that the Council recommend, and NOAA implement, stricter Chinook salmon PSC caps and set a chum salmon PSC cap to alleviate some of the stress to these vital yet struggling salmon populations. Please contact the undersigned at tim@salmonstate.org or loretta@salmonstate.org with any questions. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Tim Bristol
Executive Director
SalmonState
tim@salmonstate.org



Loretta Brown
Legal and Policy Analyst
SalmonState
loretta@salmonstate.org



SalmonState

April 2, 2021

Simon Kinneen, Chairman
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501

Dr. James Balsiger, Regional Administrator
NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region
PO Box 21688
Juneau, AK 99802

Re: D5 Salmon Bycatch

Dear Chairman Kinneen, Dr. Balsiger and Council members:

Please accept these comments from SalmonState. SalmonState is an Alaska-based effort focused on making sure Alaska remains a place where wild salmon and the people who depend on them thrive. We appreciate the opportunity to offer our comments.

Throughout Alaska, the U.S. west coast and British Columbia, wild Chinook salmon runs are declining dramatically. A number of Alaskan stocks are listed as Stock of Concern including Chilkat River, King Salmon River, Unuk River, McDonald Lake, Chuitna River, Theodore River, Alexander Creek, East Susitna River, Karluk River, Ayakulik River, Yukon River, and Norton Sound Sub-district 5 & 6. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) has recommended the Alaska Board of Fisheries designate additional Chinook salmon stocks to those Stocks of Concern in Southeast Alaska, including the Chickamin River, Stikine River, Andrew Creek, and Taku River due to low Chinook salmon runs for 5 consecutive years.

The causes of these declines are variable and multifaceted. Recent studies by University of Alaska, University of Washington, NOAA, and USGS fisheries biologists found that Chinook salmon ecosystems “are changing quickly as a result of climate change and habitat alteration” and “warming water temperatures are currently affecting northern populations of Pacific salmon” and model projects that “substantial ocean redistribution in response to [sea surface temperature].” A major decline in Chinook runs over the past several years have left scientists and commercial, sport, and subsistence fishery participants alike with growing concern for the sustainability and recovery of the Alaska Chinook populations. Faced with these declines, Chinook salmon fisheries have been reduced in recent years throughout the State – from


Southeast Alaska troll fisheries to subsistence fisheries in the Yukon River and all points in between. Subsistence, sport, and commercial fisheries throughout Alaska have seen drastic reductions in allocation, area closures, and full closures due to these declines and poor population sizes.

Most recently, Alaska Department of Fish and Game has closed the Kuskokwim River drainage to sport fishing for Chinook salmon. ADFG determined that the 2021 forecasted runs for Chinook salmon in the Kuskokwim River are “similar to the 2020 run,” a season in which “there were substantial closures of subsistence fishery.” Closures such as this and those felt by commercial, sport, and subsistence fisheries statewide are devastating to small family- owned businesses., While this closure is but one example of the heavy restrictions and closures being implemented throughout the other commercial, sport, and subsistence fishing user groups in Alaska, the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries continue to be allocated high allowable bycatch allotments. Those commercial, sport, and subsistence fishery participants are facing not only one season’s loss of income, but a loss of livelihoods and a loss of access to a long standing cultural and traditional use resource.

In 2020, under Amendments 103 and 110, the trawl fishery caught a reported 35,000 Chinook salmon in the Bering Sea and 12,000 Chinook salmon in the Gulf of Alaska as bycatch. The genetic studies in front of the Council this April indicate that in 2019, 55% of the Chinook bycatch from the Bering Sea Aleutian Island trawl fishery were “from Alaska river systems flowing into the Bering Sea” and “the vast majority of Chinook salmon that are encountered originate from regions South and East of the Alaska Peninsula” in the Gulf of Alaska trawl fishery. We appreciate the efforts being made by the Council and industry to reduce bycatch, but in this time of Chinook salmon crisis more action is needed. Continued bycatch in the trawl fleets raises conservation concerns and equity issues as harvest of this critical species is effectively allocated away from coastal communities that rely on the Chinook salmon commercial, sport, and subsistence fisheries to the trawl fleet as bycatch. In setting bycatch limits, the Council should consider the dire warning of multiple fisheries biologists, that with an inevitable increase in ocean and freshwater temperatures, Chinook salmon populations and abundance will continue to be adversely affected by these trends.

We request that the Council revisit the Chinook salmon bycatch limits and further reduce bycatch to support conservation and management of these critical stocks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Bristol', with a stylized, flowing script.

Tim Bristol
Executive Director
SalmonState
Homer, Alaska