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### **Commissioner Cotten Addresses King Salmon Closures and Restrictions in Northern Cook Inlet**

Over the last several years all Alaskans have witnessed our Chinook, or king salmon runs continue their downward trend of productivity. This trend ultimately results in fewer spawning adults returning to their natal streams causing escapement goals to be missed, and potentially fewer young fish to continue their anadromous lifecycle. Low productivity can also mean less opportunities for subsistence, sport and commercial fishers to sustainably harvest king salmon. Every year, Alaska Department of Fish and Game fishery managers balance their pre-season management decisions based on the best available science, while striving to provide opportunity to harvest these magnificent fish. During periods of low-productivity our managers are forced to make tough decisions that might restrict or in some cases, close specific rivers or areas to harvest. The department is keenly aware how these management decisions can have dramatic impact on local economies, families, and individuals.

These management decisions are not taken lightly.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game is mandated by the state constitution to manage our fish and wildlife resources under the sustained yield principle. Managing for sustainable salmon runs during periods of low productivity can mean we may have to place severe restrictions today on fishing to ensure we have fish for tomorrow and future generations.

About five years ago, a significant research effort was undertaken to specifically study king salmon populations to better understand the statewide downturn in king salmon productivity. Many of these studies showed our out-migrating smolt were not surviving within months of entering the marine environment. While specific causes have not been identified, the department is confident that our statewide downturn in productivity can point directly back at smolt survival after entering the ocean.

Since 2007 our Northern Cook Inlet river systems have mimicked other Alaska king salmon populations by trending down. To respond to this trend locally, our fishery managers placed significant fishing restrictions on sport anglers and commercial fishers that severely reduced their opportunity to harvest king salmon, with a goal to increase escapement. Even with these restrictions, those streams draining from the Talkeetna Mountains into the Susitna River (Eastside Susitna tributaries) continued to miss the established escapement goals most years. Westside Susitna tributaries draining from the Alaska Range, that include the Yentna drainage and Deshka River, fared better under restrictive regulations, achieving established escapement goals through 2016, but missed all goals in 2017.

Looking ahead to this summer, our preseason forecast for the Deshka River predicts a run of 12,800 king salmon. The escapement goal range for the Deshka River is between 13,000 to 28,000 returning adults. The forecast suggests we'll see a weak return of 5-year-old fish, which is typically the largest portion of the run. And, we face similar uncertainty with predicting the return of our 4-year-old fish. In 2017, even with sport and commercial restrictions in place, the Deshka River did not achieve its king salmon escapement goal. The 2018 preseason forecast calls for an even smaller number of returning adults than returned in 2017, and we anticipate these low numbers are likely to be experienced throughout the Susitna drainage.

This leaves the department no choice but to close the entire Susitna River drainage to the sport harvest of king salmon. Catch-and-release fishing for king salmon will be allowed in the Deshka and Yentna systems, but the rest of the drainage will be closed to fishing for king salmon altogether. Additionally, all commercial king salmon fishing in the Northern District will be closed in 2018 due to the projected low numbers of returning adult king salmon. The closure of the commercial fishery is tied to the poor pre-season outlook as well as the Northern Cook Inlet king salmon management plan that requires paired actions when the Deshka River is closed.

While the Susitna River drainage may be closed to king salmon retention, there are other nearby opportunities to fish for king salmon this summer. The terminal fisheries at the Eklutna Tailrace and Ship Creek provide opportunities to pursue king salmon under general regulations during the early summer. Fishing for king salmon on the Little Su will be open under restrictive regulations which will be defined by Emergency Order. In the waters of the Susitna River, upstream of the Deshka River (Unit 2) fishing for trout and other species will continue to be allowed seven days per week.

The department recognizes the tremendous impact these closures will bring to our commercial and sport fishers. To ensure sustainable fisheries, our professional fisheries managers will look for these closures to give us the greatest potential for achieving our king salmon escapement goals in 2018 in the Susitna River drainage. Throughout the summer of 2018 our staff will use weirs and aerial surveys to gauge run strength to assess if the closure might be modified inseason.

Closures of fisheries are never easy decisions to make. They will cause pain and hardship to many Alaskans, and to many visitors who were looking for that fishing trip of a lifetime. Our hope is that short-term pain will result in long-term gain for our iconic king salmon populations across the state. I'm confident that we can collectively work towards ensuring our king salmon continue to be sustainably managed for generations to come.

*Sam Cotten is the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and grew up fishing in the Mat-Su Valley.*