It Takes Fish To Make Fish 2017

Keep the Corridor Open

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Fish and Wildlife Commission

Who We Are

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Fish & Wildlife Commission: Left to right: front, Assembly Member Steve Colligan, Chair Terry Nininger, Larry Engel, Jehnifer Ehmann, Howard Delo. Back: Mike Wood, Andy Couch, former Chair Bruce Knowles, Assembly Member Jim Sykes.

Our Experience

- 8-member volunteer board, appointed by the Mayor, including two Borough Assembly Members
- 12 years of combined experience on the Alaska Board of Fisheries with three years as Chair, 50 years of combined expertise as State biologists, 30+ years combined experience as fishing guides and six years as a commercial setnetter
- Directed $2.5 million in State appropriations toward science, genetic research, and fish passage

Our Goals

- Using science and securing research funding to ensure the sustainability of Southcentral Alaska's salmon
- Preserving the gains of 2014
- In 2014, the Alaska Board of Fisheries voted unanimously to accept a proposal for sustainability from this body.
- The proposal changed when and where the commercial drift fleet fishes in the Central District similar to the terminal reserve method of Bristol Bay. The 7 to 0 vote essentially gave regulatory teeth to the Conservation Corridor, first adopted in 2011.
- It Takes Fish to Make Fish. We asked for the changes to allow commercial fishermen to target sockeye closer to shore, while allowing the northernbound coho and sockeye to slip through Upper Cook Inlet.

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The Corridor is Beginning to Work

It Takes Fish to Make Fish—Keep the Corridor Open

We asked for the Conservation Corridor to require commercial fishermen to target Kenai sockeye closer to shore, in order to allow the struggling northernbound coho and sockeye to slip through Upper Cook Inlet. When the corridor concept was first adopted in 2011 and then given more regulatory teeth in 2014, the Northern District streams were almost universally in decline. Since the Corridor began, however, upticks in coho escapement in 2014 & 2015, and sockeye escapement in 2015 on some of the key rivers and creeks has shown promise. Additionally, the new report

"Temporal and Spatial Distributions of Kenai River and Susitna River Sockeye Salmon and Coho Salmon in Upper Cook Inlet: Implications for Management"

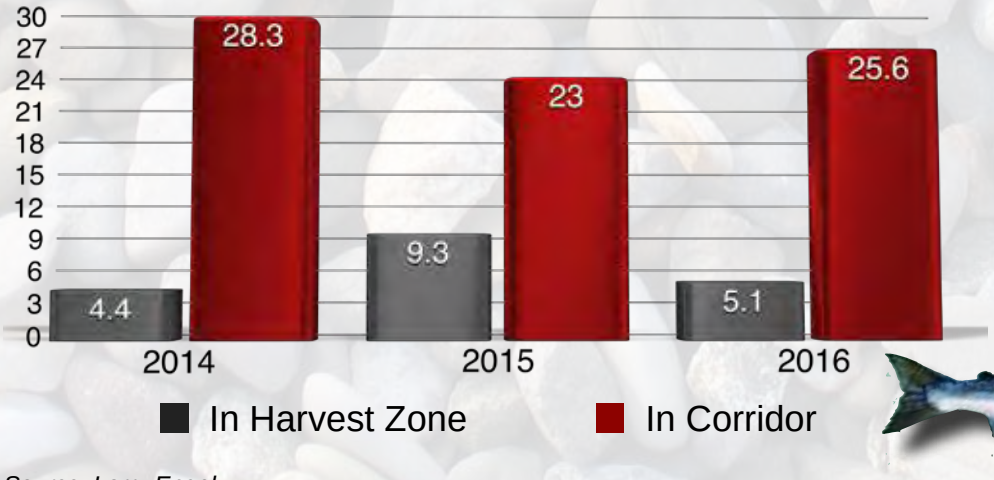
by the Alaska Dept.of Fish & Game confirms the need for the Conservation Corridor. Fishing for Kenai sockeye in the harvest zones, closer to shore, will harvest fewer Susitna sockeye and Susitna coho because these northern salmon are mostly running up the middle of the Central District.

We are not seeking allocative increases at the expense of other fisheries. Rather we seek to maintain important conservation measures that benefit depressed stocks, allow targeted harvest on abundant stocks, and share in the benefits that will accrue to all fisheries. Restoring the Northern District runs means more fish in the rivers and in the ocean. Please continue enforcing the Corridor because this management strategy benefits all users of Upper Cook Inlet salmon. More importantly, we earnestly request that you manage Upper Cook Inlet for sustainability.

Before the Corridor

- angler days for sportsfishing sank to the lowest level in 37 years
- escapement goals—the bedrock of fisheries management—had met chronic failure in Northern District sockeye and coho streams, while in the south the sockeye commercial harvest often had successive emergency openings to catch more fish
- coho returns in Northern Cook Inlet streams reached 20-year lows in 2011-2012
- 8 of the State's 14 Stocks of Concern are right here for sockeye and kings

Average Drift Fleet Per Vessel Coho Delivery, July 16-31



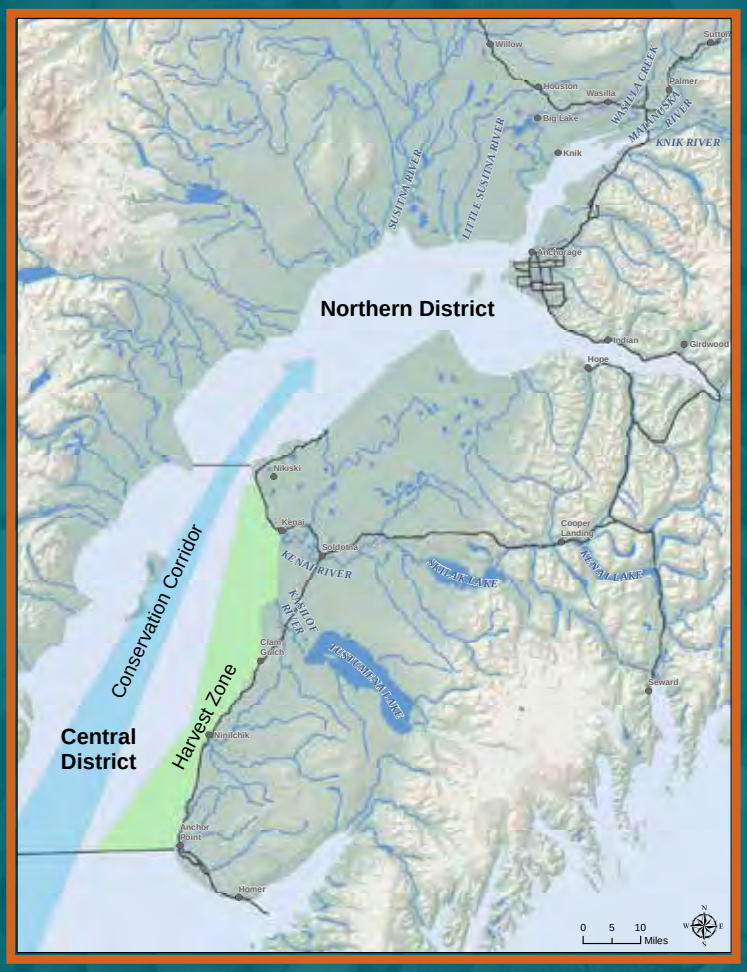
Source: Larry Engel

Maintaining the Corridor

A Reasonable Opportunity

In 2014, because of a 7 to 0 vote by the Alaska Board of Fisheries, a sea change occurred. A second iteration of a Conservation Corridor enforced a clear directive that had been side-stepped for more than 35 years. The Central District Drift Gillnet Management Plan ensures "adequate escapement of salmon into the Northern District **drainages" and the drift gillnet fishery is managed "to minimize the harvest of Northern District and Kenai River coho salmon in order to provide sport and guided sport fishermen a reasonable opportunity to harvest** these salmon stocks over the entire run..."

However, from 2000-2016, the drift harvest had averaged more than 100,000 coho per year, while the Mat-Su sport fishery had harvested 65,000 per year until 2015. This higher catch rate was occuring as bycatch. The drift fleet was actually targeting Kenai sockeye when it netted most of the northern coho. With the Corridor, during much of July the drift fleet is restricted to fish inshore near the rivers where the Kenai and Kasilof sockeye originate, allowing northernbound coho to pass north. This practice is not new. The most successful fishery in the world, Bristol Bay, is regulated this way with Harvest Zones.



Hold Tight to Escapement Goals

Kenai sockeye returns often drive the sockeye escapement goals and outcomes of the Susitna Drainage. There has been a history of the commercial drift fishery driving the Northern District fisheries. In 2005, for example, on the Yentna River, the escapement goal (OEG*) for a struggling sockeye fishery was set by the then Board of Fisheries lower than what is normally considered scientifically sustainable. It was done in order to maximize the harvest of a large Kenai sockeye run. The result: that year—the Yentna escapement was, by far, the lowest ever while the Cook Inlet sockeye harvest exceeded 5.3 million. This escapement goal inflation is still going on today by ADF&G. By reducing the escapement goals on a struggling stock, the returns appear healthy but are simply meeting a lower goal. * OEG-optimum escapement goal

Kenai Sockeye Are More Productive

Kenai sockeye are highly productive (4.5 fish returned per spawner) and can be harvested heavily but Susitna sockeye are less productive (less than 1.5 fish per spawner*) and cannot withstand the harvest rate withstood by Kenai sockeye, yet this is what occurs. The Central District commercial fishery is overfishing Susitna sockeye and has historically overexploited Susitna coho beyond a fair share in the sport fishery directive.

*Source: ADF&G**

A Short Lifetime of Missing Fish

On the first day of bait in 2014, three girls who went fishing benefited from a strong return of cohos on the Little Susitna River. At 24,200 salmon, that year was the best escapement of coho on the Little Su since 2006. Such a robust return had not occurred for nearly the girls' lifetime.

2014 was also the year that a Conservation Corridor for northernbound salmon was given regulatory teeth by the Alaska Board of Fisheries.

The new Corridor regulations require the drift gillnet commercial fleet to fish closer to shore for most of July for the species they are targeting—Kenai sockeye. With gillnets removed from the center of the Central District, coho and sockeye have a substantially improved lane to return to spawning grounds seven days north in the Matanuska-Susitna Basin, where the girls fished.

In 2 of the last 3 years since the Corridor opened, coho escapements have expressed upticks in numbers.

- ***2014 returns for cohos best on Little Susitna River since 2006***
  —returns for cohos best on Fish Creek since 2002
- ***2015 returns met escapement goals on Little Susitna River***
  —returns exceeded goals on Fish Creek
- ***2016 a modest coho return to Cook Inlet***

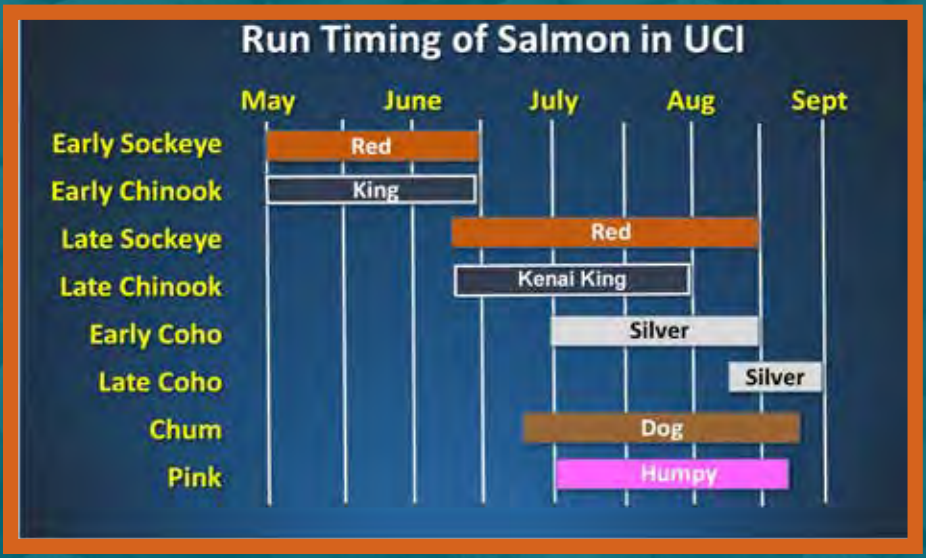
Source: Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game, Sam Ivey

Progress that may be, but the Corridor still needs more time to work. In 2016, two out of the three escapements for coho failed in Knik Arm at the Little Susitna River and at Jim Creek. However, sportfishing would have been much worse without the Corridor. Also, cohos were not fully counted on Fish Creek this year due to a State funding shortage, but Fish Creek was in goal range when the weir was pulled.

A day of bounty for three 9-year-old Mat-Su sports fishermen: Emily and Leily Hinman, and Cassie King, shown kissing bicep.

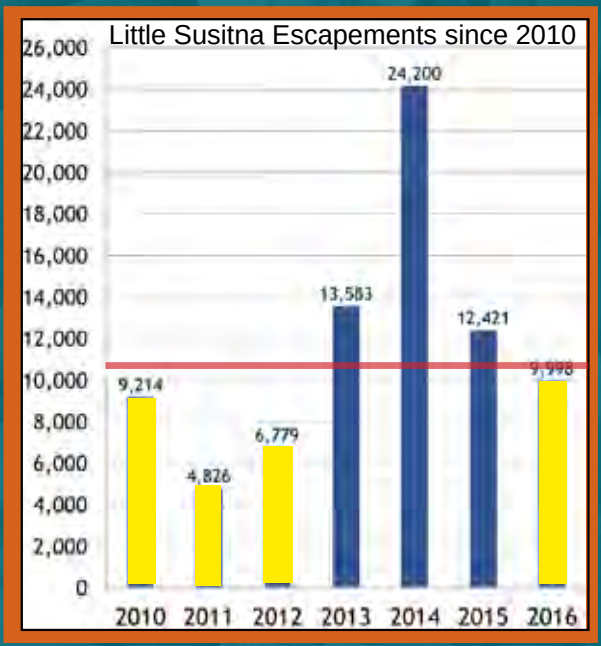
Mixed Stock Fishery Complexity

Every July, five different species of salmon and numerous different stocks of salmon come through about the same time in Upper Cook Inlet. Among the salmon, are the Kenai sockeye, the Kenai kings, the Northern cohos and the Northern sockeye, all swimming in the same saltwater with commercial boats after them. This is a mixed stock commercial fishery. Personal use dipnetters are also with their nets out, and days farther up stream are the northern set gillnets on shore, still farther north are subistence users and finally the sport fishery in the Mat-Su Basin.



This overlapping run timing makes the commercial fishery difficult and complex to manage. How does a drift gillnet boat target Kenai sockeye, and let the northern-bound cohos pass? Adding to it is the heartiness of the fish. Kenai sockeye produce more returning offspring than Northern sockeye: 4.5 fish per spawner to Susitna's less than 1.5 fish per spawner. This means that only one Susitna sockeye offspring can be harvested if the stock will sustain itself versus the seven eligible Kenai offspring. The less productive stocks cannot sustain the same high harvest rates as the strong Kenai stock.

Management of the Inlet's weak- and strong-stock "mix" and for the different species often results in substantial conflict among user groups. When commercial fishermen have a banner year for sockeye, sportsfishermen often face closures because of few returning cohos. By studying when and where specific stocks and species are located, hotly contested harvest practices can hopefully be fine-tuned to benefit all users of this common property resource. The Mat-Su Borough Fish & Wildlife Commission has funded an ongoing genetic study for coho.



Coho escapement on upticks for Little Susitna River

Lab on deck on the Little Susitna River.

Stocks of Concern

8 of the State's 14 Are Here in the Mat-Su Basin

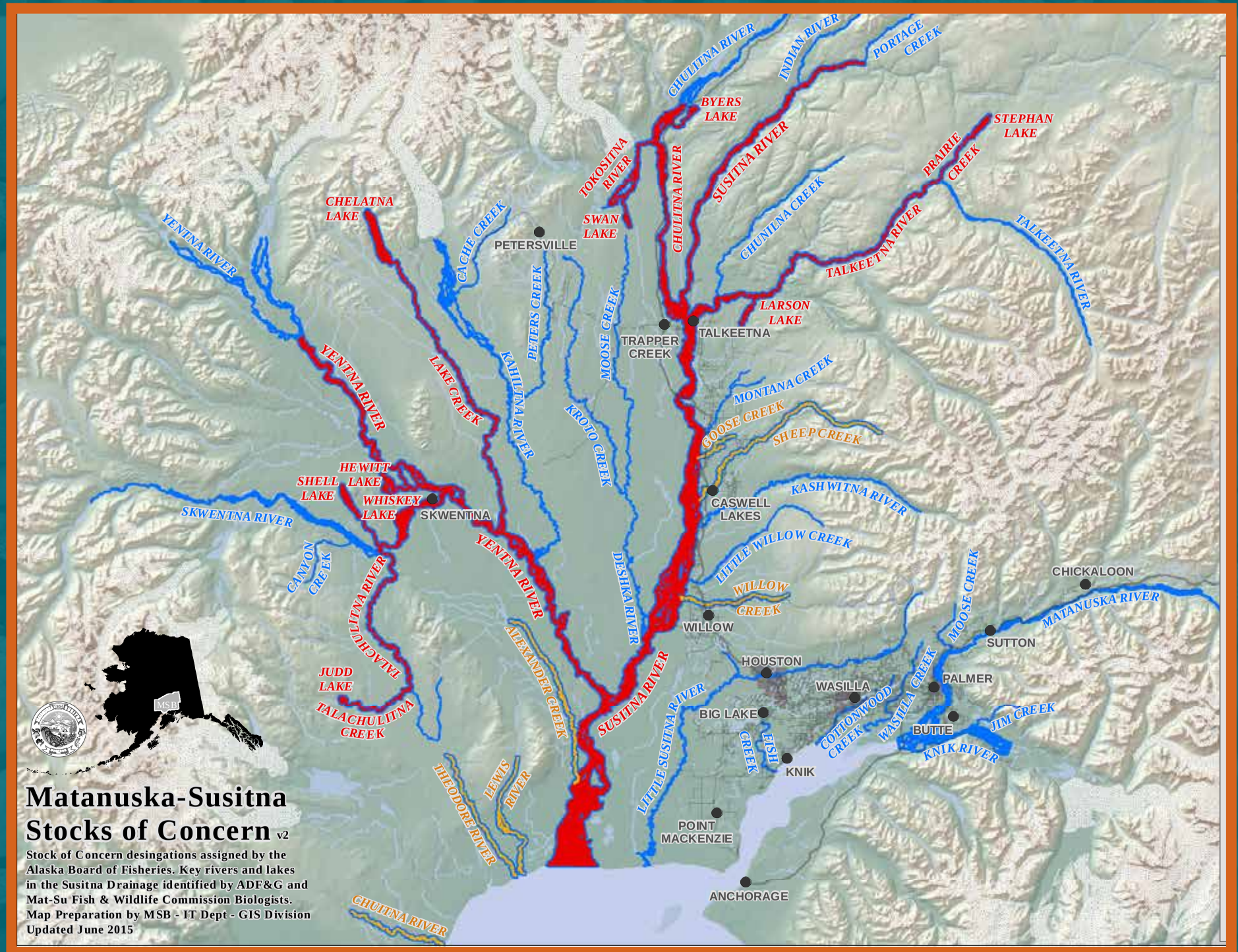
Stocks of Concern are fish that are struggling to maintain their harvest, their population stability, and in some cases their survival. Stock of Concern designations are assigned by the Alaska Board of Fisheries based on recommendations from the Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game. At the last Board of Fish meeting in 2014, another Stock of Concern was designated in the Mat-Su Basin on Sheep Creek for kings.

Salmon returns for some stocks of sockeye and kings in the Northern District have been plummeting to such low levels that their reproduction is at risk. Issues on the high seas are likely major factors affecting king salmon not the interception in the Conservation Corridor. Factors affecting sockeye occur both in fresh water with habitat and in Cook Inlet marine waters from interception by fishing.

Fishing for kings on the Deshka River in 2016, a year that saw an uptick in escapement.

The Stocks of Concern are

- ***Sockeye across the Susitna River drainage***
- ***Chinook, also called kings, in*** *Alexander Creek*
- ***Chinook in Chuitna River***
- ***Chinook in Goose Creek***
- ***Chinook in Lewis River***
- ***Chinook in Sheep Creek***
- ***Chinook in Theodore River***
- ***Chinook in Willow Creek***



Matanuska-Susitna Stocks of Concern v2

Stock of Concern desingations assigned by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. Key rivers and lakes in the Susitna Drainage identified by ADF&G and Mat-Su Fish & Wildlife Commission Biologists.
Map Preparation by MSB - IT Dept - GIS Division
Updated June 2015

Kings' Stocks of Concern shown in orange. Sockeye Stocks of Concern shown in red.

Kenai Drives It

(Bigger Projections, Smaller Protections)

When ADF&G forecasts a big Kenai sockeye run, less northern fish make it to spawn

Historically, under State regulations called the Central District Drift Gillnet Management Plan, the bigger the projection of Kenai sockeye made by ADF&G, the fewer the Susitna coho and sockeye went north. Big runs brought a more aggressive fishing rate. The drift fleet has the capability of harvesting more than half a million salmon in a single day during the peak of a strong run.

Over the last six years, however, major regulation changes have been introduced with the concept of the Conservation Corridor, the Harvest Zones, and actual restrictions on where and when to commercial fish in July when Northern coho and sockeye are running north and the Kenai sockeye are returning home.
Before 2014, during a large run, drift fisherman could fish often in an area of their choice. Today during a strong sockeye run with a projected escapement of 4.6 million fish, drifters are permitted only one 12-hour period per week in the mixed stock waters of the corridor from July 16-31.

> ***It's understandable that drift fishermen are upset. Just like Bristol Bay Drifters, they have to fish twice as hard, pay twice as much for the same number of fish. It's no longer their favorite fishing hole they*** *work in and they're jockeying for position with other boats. These are important considerations. However, the Drift Plan is a compromise. It recognizes the importance of catching Kenai sockeye and also* ***of passing fish to the north, which historically hadn't been done*** *satisfactorily until 2011. Moving the drifters out of the Corridor during* ***late July allows the Northern coho and sockeye to pass. It gets the Drifters' targeted sockeye away from the mixed stock fishery that is swimming in the middle of the Central District. —Larry Engel, Mat-Su Borough Fish & Wildlife Commissioner***

Although it takes more effort, large numbers of fish are still harvested. Since the corridor was established, the drift net fishery has harvested some of its most successful seasons of the last 20 years. The 2014 harvest is the 9th highest value in the Upper Cook Inlet commercial fishery since 1960.

This compromise is a work in progress and still needs fine-tuning. A bias in methodology still *exists toward maximizing the very productive Kenai commercial harvest at the expense of the* ***ailing Susitna coho and sockeye escapements.***

If there's the slightest inkling that the sockeye preseason forecast should go up, it will. The forecast was increased in season twice in the last six years. But, so far, in the six years of the Corridor, the forecast has never gone down even though the actual run last year was smaller than projected. In 2016 many more sockeye were forecasted than showed up.

From 2014-2016, drifters harvested an average delivery per vessel of 25.6 coho in the corridor versus 6.3 coho in the harvest **zone from July 16-31**

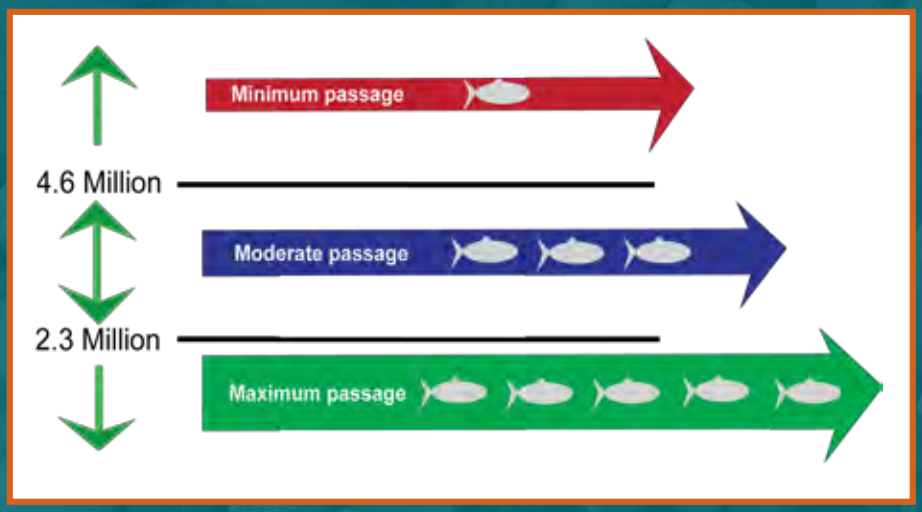
Source: Larry Engel

The Kenai sockeye projection for 2017 is shaping up to be a minimum run of 2.3 million sockeye. Under this projection it could be the first time that the northern escapements receive the full benefit of the Conservation Corridor because the drift fleet will be limited primarily to the Harvest Zone.

However, there's a provision in regulation that says all rules are off, including the Corridor, if the escapement warrants it. This has seldom been enacted.

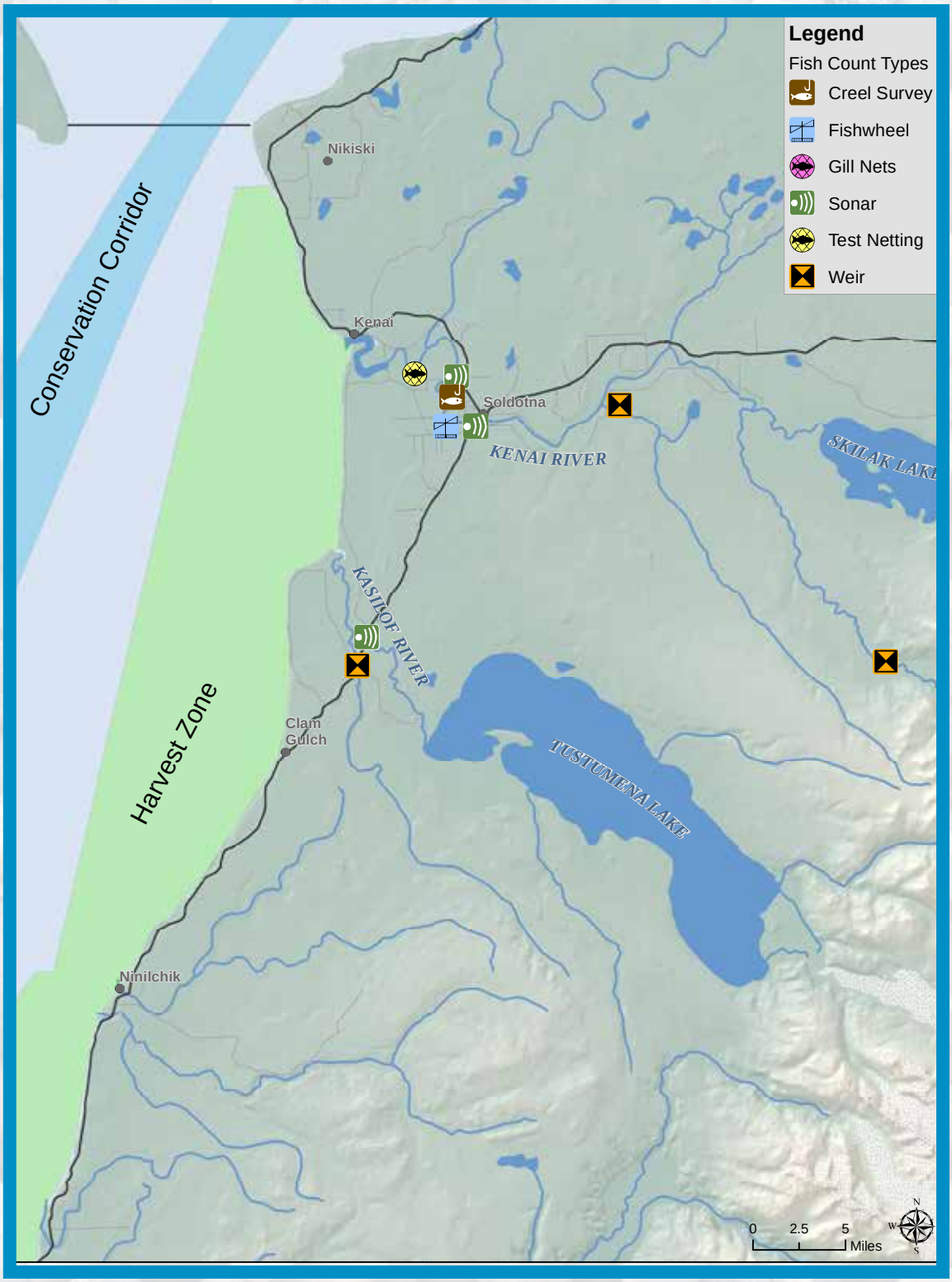
The projections trigger the amount of fishing

• At a projection for 4.6 million Kenai sockeye, the drift fleet can fish a single day a week in the corridor during July 16-31. The rest of the week, they fish in the harvest zone.



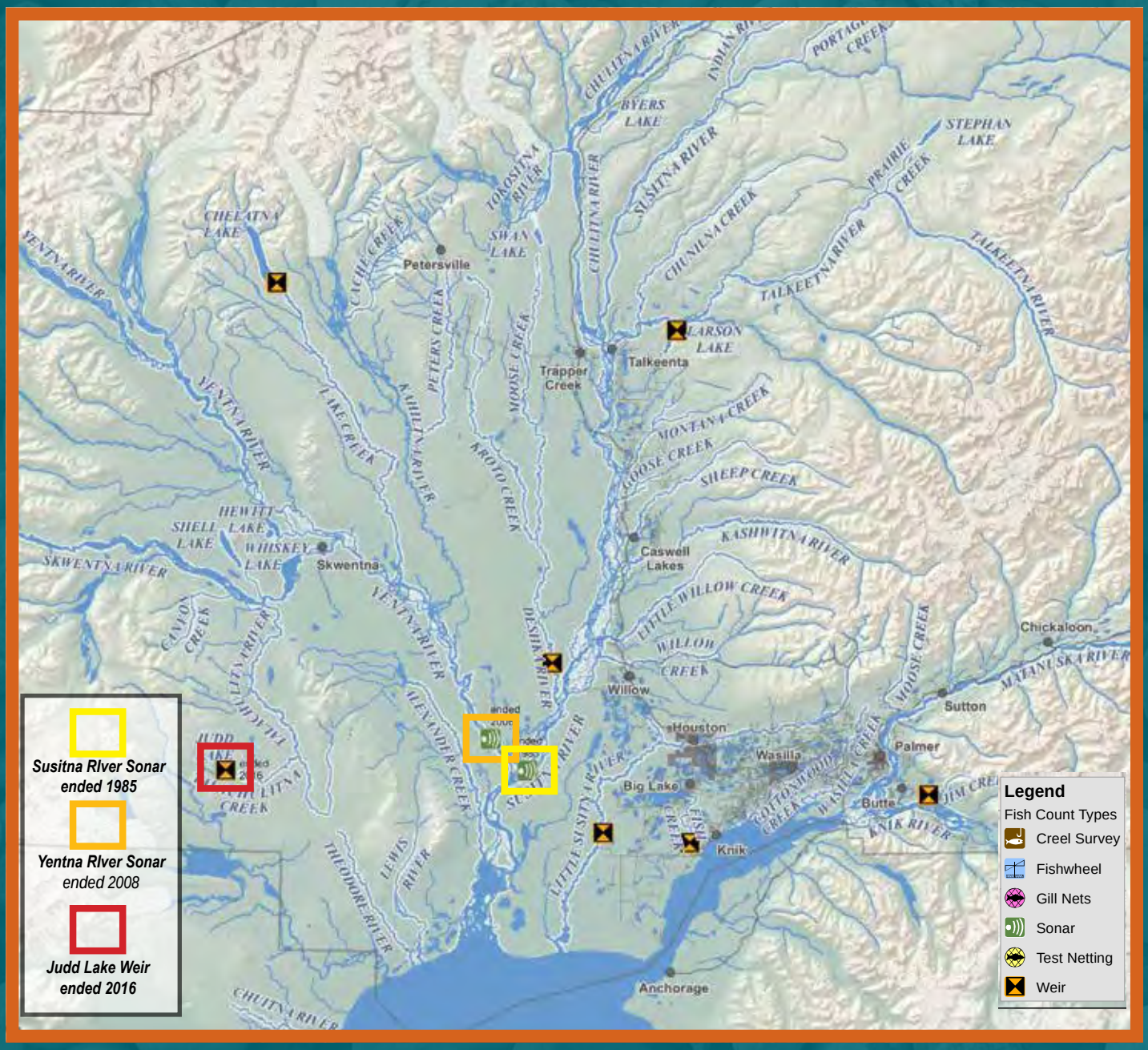
• At a projection for 2.3 million Kenai sockeye, the drift fleet *only drops nets inside the* ***harvest zone. No fishing allowed*** *in the corridor during the early* ***coho run, July 16-31***

Kenai Has the Best Located Fish Counters



Kenai weirs and sonar are close to the fishery and provide real time feedback. When a weir on the lucrative Kenai sockeye fishery was malfunctioning, it was repaired.

Fish Counting Tools Far Upstream

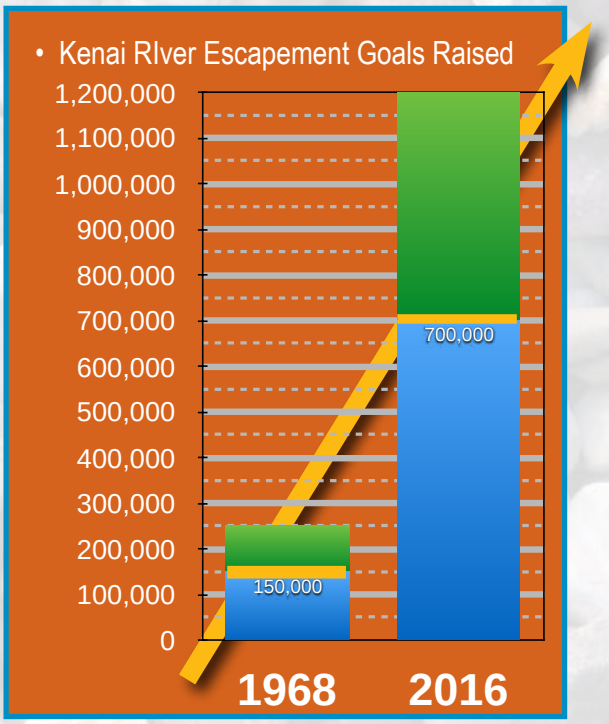


The Susitna counters, however, are far up the Inlet and farther still up Mat-Su rivers and streams, and don't provide real time data that can be used for management in season. The data mostly helps with post season management. Beginning in 1985, ADF&G ended a few programs for fish counting in the Mat-Su Basin. In 1985 sonar ended on the Susitna River. In 2008, a malfunctioning sonar on the Yentna River was removed. Last summer the weir was removed on Judd Lake. Also in 2016, the Fish Creek weir was pulled mid-season for coho.

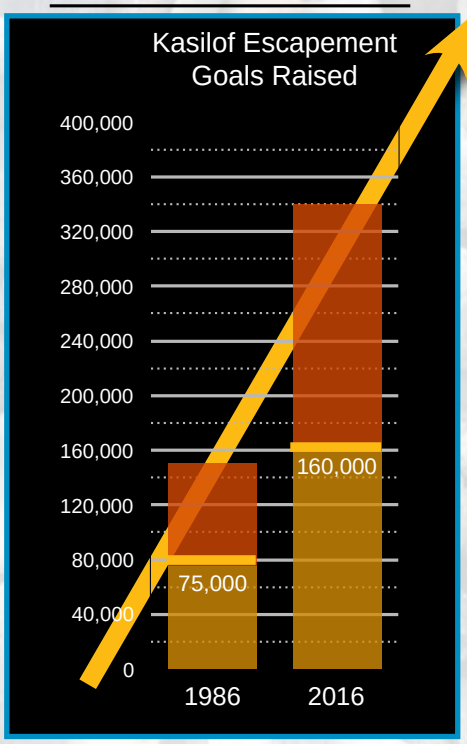
Failing Escapements & Disappearing Counters

Escapement goals are the cornerstone of fisheries management. In the Kenai region, sockeye escapement goals have increased by a million more fish since the start. But in the north, it's the** reverse. Escapement goals continue to decrease. ADF&G has responded by reducing the goals **and removing some counters. That's the opposite methodology expected for an ailing fishery.

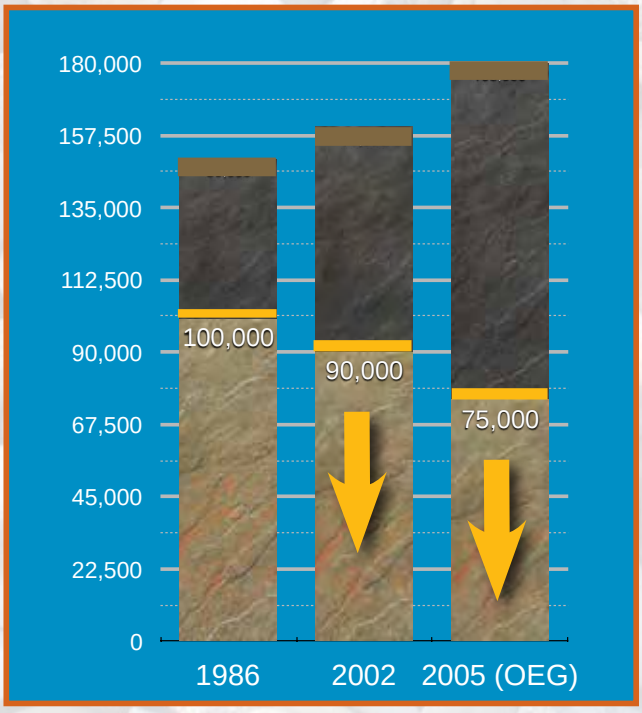
Kenai River



Kasilof River



Yentna River



In 2005, the Yentna River escapement goal for a struggling sockeye fishery was set by the then Board of Fisheries lower than what is normally considered scientifically sustainable. It was done in order to maximize the harvest of a large Kenai sockeye run. The result: that year the Yentna escapement was the lowest ever while the Cook Inlet sockeye harvest exceeded 5.3 million.

Ordering an OEG, Optimum Escapement Goal, to a level below SEG or BEG is a questionable and seldom if ever done action.

SEG-Sustainable Escapement Goal

BEG-Biological Escapement Goal

Yentna Sonar Removed for Errors

For 20 years, a sonar counter pinged the number of fish going up the Yentna River. In that time, the returning fish missed half of its annual goals. In 2008, ADF&G, citing errors, ended the Yentna counter. Conversely, a sonar counter on the Kenai River about this time also had problems. ADF&G made the corrections and fixed it. The counter works today. The Yentna sonar was replaced by weirs on three lakes. Weirs on only two lakes are counted today.

Yentna River, the sonar was once placed 6 miles upriver. *ADF&G*

This year, ADF&G recommends an escapement goal for the Deshka River coho, within the Susitna Drainage. It will be the first escapement goal for the largest coho production drainage in all of Cook Inlet.

ADF&G

Judd Lake

The number of fish returning to Judd Lake failed to make escapement goals four out of seven years. Due to State budget woes, the weir is gone.

Shell Lake

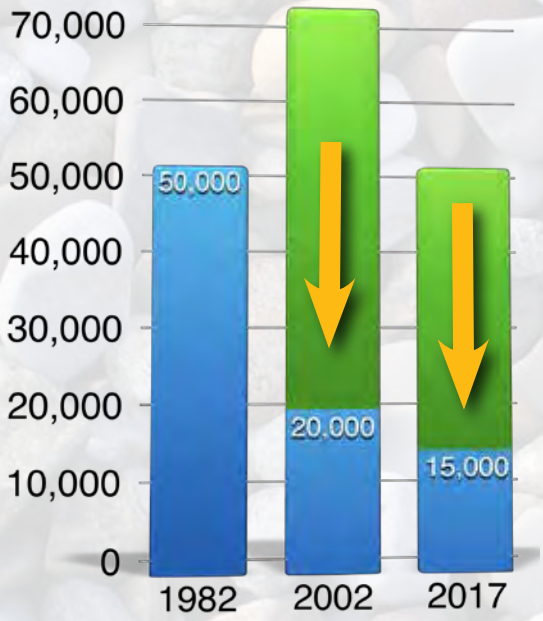
The escapement to Shell Lake has dropped from 69,800 sockeye in 2006 to 215 sockeye this year, according to Cook Inlet Aquaculture. The drastic decline of this population gives justification for a Stock of Conservation concern designation. Shell Lake has no escapement goal.

Unlike the in-river Kenai counter, today Susitna drainage tools for counting sockeye are far upstream in lakes, giving basically post season counts. Escapement goals at weirs at the three lakes of Larsen, Chelatna, and Judd have all been met in the same year just once since installed in 2009. *Interestingly, the year that all three lakes made the* ***escapement goal was in 2015, the second year of the new Drift Management Plan.***

Fish Creek Goal Lowered for Sockeye
and Removed for Coho

Fish Creek near Knik, had its first goal of 50,000 sockeye in the 1980s. Today ADF&G suggests reducing the minimum escapement to 15,000 and the maximum to 45,000. When considering the 30-year average escapement into Fish Creek, the average run exceeds what is being recommended today for the maximum escapement. This lowered escapement would give the drift fleet in the south more reasons to fish. This lowered escapement would send less fish north.

On Fish Creek, the weir was manned for sockeye, but removed for coho in 2016 due to a money shortage.



Fish Creek

No manipulation of escapement numbers occurs for Kings.

This methodology of lowering the escapement goals for failing returns is not being done with king salmon. With the northern kings and their earlier run time, there is no pressure to restrict sockeye fishing in the Central District when kings fail escapements.

The failing escapements of kings were protected and not changed. This difference in methodology is questionable if not unacceptable.

North Offshore Test Fishery Falls to State Budget Ax

Results of the recent ADF&G study on distributions of Kenai River and Susitna River sockeye and coho in Upper Cook Inlet prove the concept of the Conservation Corridor. More data is desireable from the offshore test fishery in the Central District, but the program is suspended due to a State budget shortfall.

Deshka River Weir

Fish Economics

- Sport anglers spent $118 million in the Mat-Su Borough and more than $700 million in Upper Cook Inlet, according to 2007 figures. Cook Inlet expenditures supported 8,056 jobs and generated $55 million in state and local taxes.
- More than 150,000 sport anglers and 35,000 personal use households (ie. dipnetters) fish for salmon in Upper Cook Inlet.

Fishing for coho at Jim Creek & Knik River confluence

Photo Stefan Hinman

Jim Creek

Jim Creek is one of the few road accessible fishing spots in Knik Arm. It has been a very critical fishery for Southcentral Alaska residents. At one point the angler participation was higher on Jim Creek than on the Little Susitna River. Poor coho returns in recent years has caused angler days to drop. In the last five of seven years, Jim Creek failed to meet its escapment goals, with 2016 the worst among them. 106 coho returned to Jim Creek/McRoberts Creek. The goal is 450-700.

Declining Sport Fishing Days Get Boost from Corridor

- Sport fisheries are disproportionately shouldering the conservation burden of Northern District salmon declines.
- Angler days have dropped by more than half since 1992 from a peak of 400,000+ to a range of 165,000-215,000 since 2011. These are the lowest levels of sport fishing participation since the 1970s.
- In 2014, angler days rebounded from stronger returns of cohos.

Non-Traditional Environment

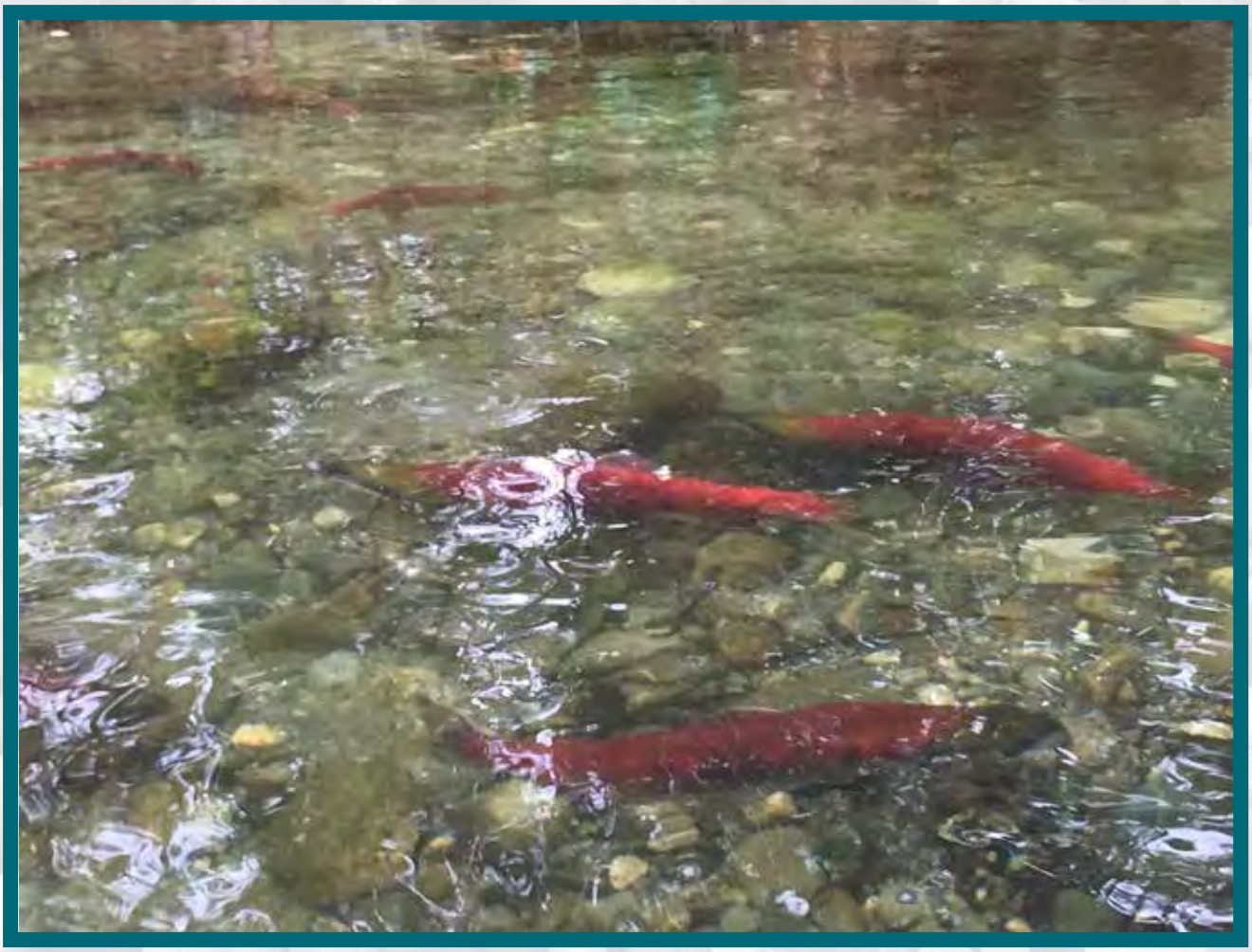
A less productive stock exposed to the same high harvest rate

Kenai

A baby salmon safely at the bottom of the 24,512-acre Skilak Lake may have no idea if a deep freeze hits. The lake is 15 miles long and up to 4 miles wide. Skilak Lake is part of the Kenai River system. The fry has access to food readily and lives in a very stable environment. Getting to the ocean is a 36-mile swim.

Mat-Su Basin

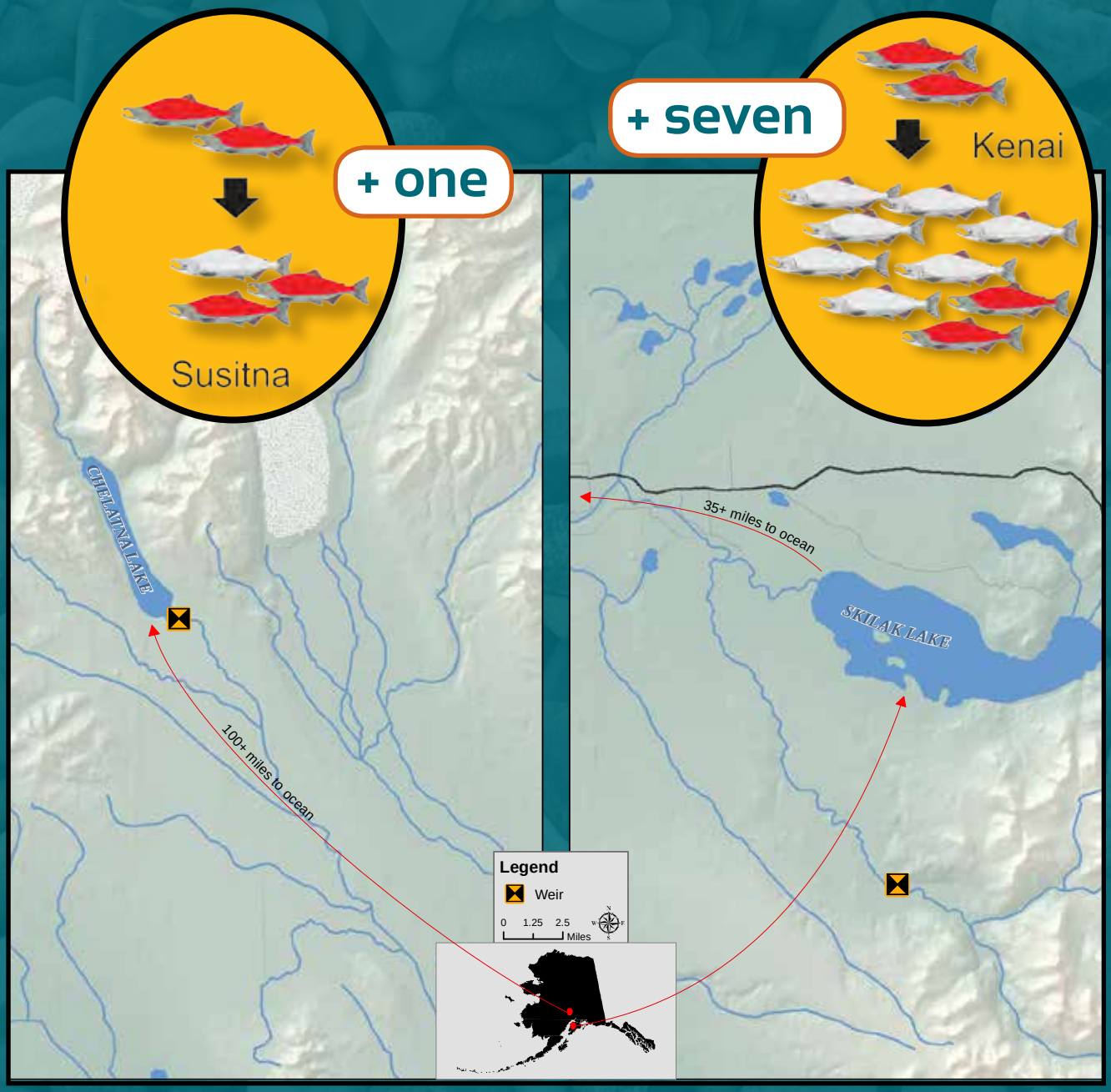
A baby salmon in the 2,739-acre Chelatna Lake would have to travel more than 100 miles to reach the ocean. The Chelatna is the largest lake in the Mat-Su region but much smaller than a Kenai lake. Half of the sockeye fry in the Mat-Su Basin don't rear in lakes at all like most sockeye salmon, but in sloughs and volatile braided river channels that are shallow and susceptible to flooding and freezing to the bottom. These scrappy salmon have adapted to marginal conditions.



A Naturally Less Productive Stock

Kenai sockeye produce more returning offspring than Northern sockeye, **4.5 fish per spawner to Susitna's less than 1.5 fish* per spawner. This** means that only one Susitna sockeye offspring can be harvested if the **stock will sustain itself versus the seven eligible Kenai offspring. The** less productive stocks cannot sustain the same high harvest rates as can the strong Kenai stock.

*Source: ADF&G



Unprecedented Fish Passage Improvements

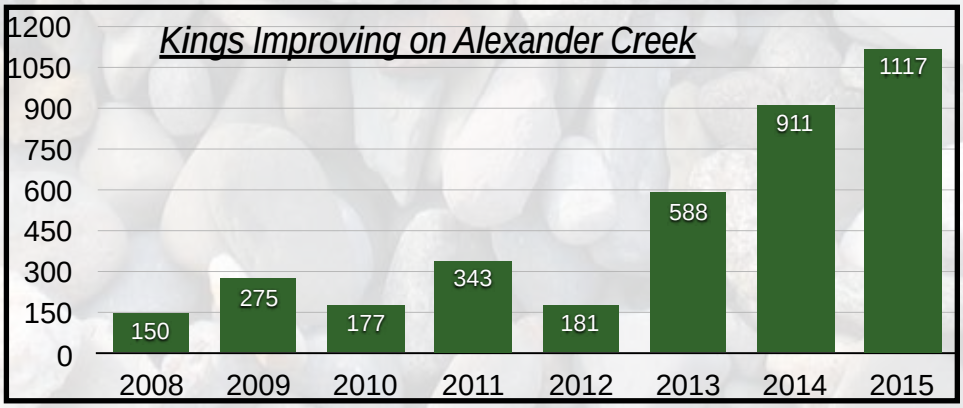
In 2016 the number of culverts replaced for salmon passage reached 107 within the Matanuska-Susitna Borough on state, local government, Alaska Railroad and private land. No other local government in Alaska has such an aggressive replacement program. The Mat-Su is lauded in Washington, D.C. by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for doing it right. Three national awards have been credited to the Mat-Su & its partners. The better fish passage has reopened more than 100 miles of fish habitat.
Most of these improperly-sized culverts and formerly blocked passages were well to the east of our major salmon-producing rivers.

"The scale of the fish passage program in the Mat-Su is pretty unprecedented in the commitment to really seeing through and improving fish passage boroughwide."
—Alaska Dept. Fish & Game, summer 2016

$1.6 M to Salmon Research

The Mat-Su Fish & Wildlife Commission directed $2.5 million in State appropriations toward science, genetic research, and fish passage. The Commission led a stakeholder effort to prioritize research needs for Upper Cook Inlet. It's the first time a research plan has been completed for the Inlet despite decades of fishing.

One of the research projects is genetic identification of coho in Upper Cook Inlet. Data has been collected on Kenai sockeye for more than ten years. When enough of a comparative data base is compiled on coho, scientists may have a better understanding of where coho travel and when through the corridor. The genetic data on coho may help reshape the boundaries of the Conservation Corridor. Today the harvest zone extends 8 to 10 miles seaward into the main channel.



Bad Habitat Happens

Problems with habitat exist here as they do in all parts of Alaska. Beaver dams, invasive weeds, and of course pike, a salmon predator. All-out warfare has occurred at Alexander Creek, one of the most troublesome pike areas. From 2011-2014, more than 15,000 pike had been removed by ADF&G efforts. King salmon from this region saw a spike in returns for the last three years, after mostly flat returns back to 2008. The increased returns still fall well below escapement goals.

Northern District Set Gillnet Fishery

Setnetters picking the net at the mouth of the Ivan River, two miles west of the Susitna River toward the Lewis River.

Photo Joshua Foreman

The Conservation Corridor benefits northern commercial users. The Northern District of Cook Inlet begins at the narrowest part of Cook Inlet and extends to the Susitna River, Knik, and Turnagain Arm. This is a setnet fishery, a small-scale, family run fishery with many difficulties including the long transport of catch to a processor in the Kenai or Anchorage. Many fishermen have adapted by direct marketing to residents.

About 90 Northern District set gillnet permits are registered on average and 80 are fished.

Sockeye harvests have been in steady decline for the Northern District setnetter. However, there has been a slight upward trend in harvest numbers since the implementation of the Conservation Corridor in 2014.

4 Proposals

Matanuska-Susitna Borough Fish & Wildlife Commission

PROPOSAL 213 – Paired Northern District Commercial & Sport Restrictions

5 AAC 21.358. Northern District Salmon Management Plan

Close commercial fishing within one mile of Little Susitna River when the Little Susitna River sport fishery is restricted to no bait.

PROPOSAL 214 – Paired Northern District Commercial & Sport Restrictions

5 AAC 21.366. Amend the Northern District King Salmon Management Plan by adding:

(12) If more than half of the Northern District streams with king salmon escapement goals are closed to king salmon sport harvest, the commissioner shall close by emergency order the Northern District setnet fishery until the first regular period after June 24.

(13) If the Little Susitna River sport fishery is restricted by emergency order, the commissioner shall close by emergency order the commercial fishing within one mile of the Little Susitna River confluence with Knik Arm.

PROPOSAL 220 – Larsen Creek Mouth Closure

5 AAC 61.120. Special provisions for the seasons, bag, possession, and size limits, and methods and means for Unit 5 of the Susitna River Drainage Area.

Establish sport fishery closure times in the Larsen Creek drainage, as follows:

Larsen Creek including all waters within a 1/4 mile radius of its confluence with the Talkeetna River closed to fishing from 11:00 pm to 6:00 am from July 1 to August 15.

PROPOSAL 230 - Deshka River King Salmon Management Plan

5 AAC 61.XXX. Create a Deshka River King Salmon Management Plan, as follows:

The purpose of this plan is to direct the Department to manage the Deshka River sport king salmon fishery to attain spawning escapements within the SEG range of 13,000 - 28,000 fish, while encouraging adaptive management to attain the escapement objective in a manner which avoids inseason closures and restrictions when possible, and thereby maximizes benefit as much as practical.

A family of five fishing for kings on the Deshka river in 2016.

Recommendations

The Commission offers the following recommendations to the 2017 Board of Fisheries

1. Continue to protect Stocks of Concern—particularly Susitna sockeye

Susitna sockeye are currently a Stock of Yield Concern. Continuing declines and chronic escapement failures also qualify this stock for listing as a stock of management and conservation concern. Susitna sockeye are tremendously diverse but inherently less productive than Kenai and Kasilof populations which drive Upper Cook Inlet commercial fisheries. Freshwater productivity of Susitna sockeye also appears to be declining. The combination of declined productivity and continuing high harvest rates are a recipe for extinction. Freshwater production problems are an imperative for limiting exploitation, not an excuse for continued overfishing in the mixed stock commercial fishery.

2. Maintain the conservation corridor in the Central District drift gillnet fishery—it is working as designed

The conservation corridor provides strategic time and area closures in the center of Cook Inlet and expands use of terminal fishing areas based on abundance of the Kenai and Kasilof sockeye. Following corridor adoption, significant increases were observed in sockeye and coho salmon runs to the Mat-Su, local sport fisheries and escapements. The uptick in salmon numbers is part of what we, the Commission, were asking for when the 2014 Alaska Board of Fisheries adopted the current drift gillnet fishery management plan.

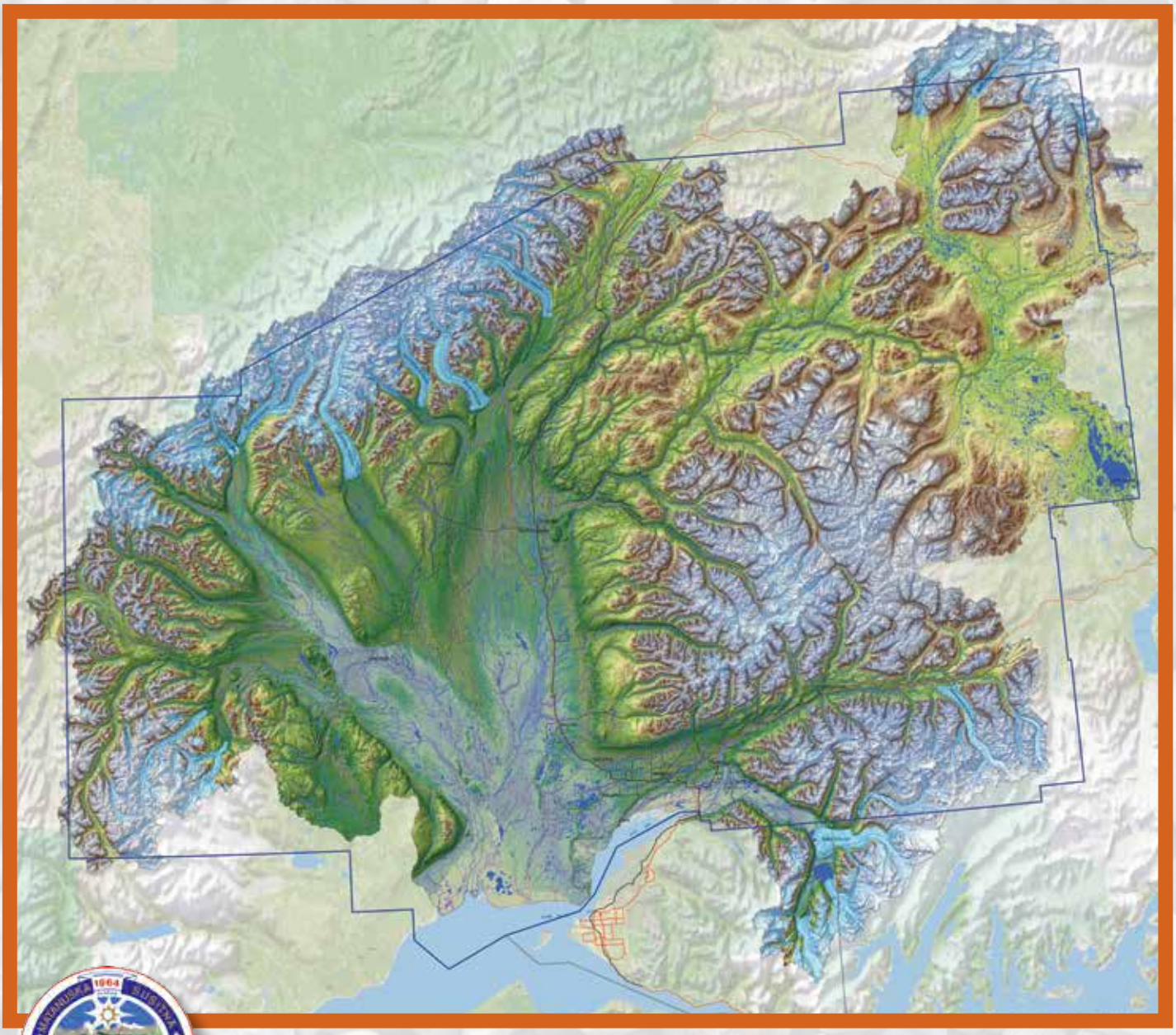
3. Limit commercial drift gillnet fishing in August to avoid excessive coho harvest

Most of the commercial drift gillnet fishery is closed by regulation in August when less than 1% of the season's total sockeye harvest is caught on two consecutive fishery openers. This rule provides flexibility to extend the commercial fishing season when the sockeye run is late and significant numbers continue to be available for harvest. The rule also ensures that commercial harvest of sport-priority coho and Kenai kings is limited after the sockeye run winds down. This closure rule, as adopted, was meant to be absolute except as otherwise provided under the commissioner's authority to manage to meet escapement goals as a first priority.

4. Continue to provide robust personal use opportunities where stocks permit

Over 30,000 households now participate in the UCI personal use fishery, harvesting 600,000 or more sockeye salmon per year, primarily from Kenai or Kasilof rivers. The majority of participation comes from residents of areas outside the Kenai Peninsula including the Mat-Su as other regional personal use opportunities are quite limited. The Commission supports maintaining and enhancing personal use fishery opportunities wherever possible. Commercial fishery limitations including closure "windows" are essential for delivering fish to the rivers when sockeye are running. The Commission also supports proposals to increase in-river goals for Kenai late-run sockeye for consistency with current in-river harvest levels.

The Matanuska-Susitna Basin



The Nature Conservancy

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