

Representing the Matanuska-Susitna Borough Fish and Wildlife Commission, Howard Delo's comments on protecting the Conservation Corridor in Cook Inlet

RC 27

- I'll be referring to our Commission booklet, *It Takes Fish to Make Fish 2020* contained in PC 83, starting on page 34 of the PC and discussing pages 4, 10, and 11.
- Terminal stock fisheries management is the hallmark of successful management. The center of Cook Inlet sees a tremendous mix of salmon species travelling together to different spawning streams in both the Central and Northern Districts. After years of mixed stock management, leading to several significant management issues, the Board made significant advances in 2014; they created the expanded harvest area around the Kasilof and Kenia Rivers; they set in place a method to define the end of the commercial sockeye fishery; and they emphasized the Conservation Corridor as a means to move Northern District fish through the district. When the commercial drift fleet is allowed to fish in the Conservation Corridor and randomly harvest these mixed stocks, Northern District stocks are impacted way out of proportion to Central District salmon stocks, because of the poorer productive ability of the Northern stocks.
- Implementation of this Conservation Corridor management approach yielded results which were immediate and significant. In the first year, in-river users in the Northern district enjoyed a successful sport fishery for Coho and escapements for sockeye increased. Commercial harvesters enjoyed an excellent season as well.
- Genetic studies by ADF&G have shown that 95% of the silver salmon stocks harvested by the drift fleet are Northern District fish when harvest occurs in the Conservation Corridor.
- Studies from 2014 through 2019 supported by genetics sampling further show an average delivery of Coho salmon harvested in the Conservation Corridor during July 16-31 to be 53 fish per vessel. During this same period, average harvest for the expanded harvest zones is 10 fish per vessel.
- The Central District drift fleet has long maintained they are primarily interested in harvesting Kenai and Kasilof sockeye salmon. In fact, the whole management scheme for Cook Inlet salmon is based on the numbers of returning Kenai sockeye. Moving the fleet over toward the east side of the Inlet, into the expanded harvest zones, focuses commercial efforts on harvesting these Kenai and Kasilof sockeye closer to their natal streams and reduces the interception of northern-bound salmon moving through the Conservation Corridor.
- The Commission recognizes that it takes more effort for the commercial drift fleet to harvest fish in the expanded harvest zones rather than in the center of the inlet. However, large numbers of fish are still harvested in the commercial drift fishery. Since the corridor

was established, the drift fleet has had some of their most successful seasons in the last two decades.

- This use of the Conservation Corridor in the management of the Central District drift fishery is a compromise. It recognizes the importance of catching Kenai sockeye and also of passing fish to the Northern District, which, historically, hasn't been done satisfactorily until 2011. Moving the drifters out of the Corridor during late July allows the northern bound Coho and sockeye to pass. It gets the drifters' targeted sockeye away from the mixed stocks swimming in the middle of the Central District.
- In 2017, the Board reversed many of the advances they had made and the results were again significant and immediate. Harvests of northern-bound Coho and Susitna sockeye in the drift fishery increased as a result to the expanded fishing area and additional fishing time and diminishment of the 1% rule. Fisheries suffered in Northern District streams as did the inriver users.
- Current time and area restrictions in the Central District Drift Fishery do not adequately protect delivery of sockeye to the northern district. To improve movement of fish north, we must amend the Central District Drift Gillnet Fishery Management Plan with mandatory area restrictions to regular fishing periods.
- We support proposals 104 and 129 which, along with proposals 127, 133, and 199, will strengthen the conservation corridor in Upper Cook Inlet and put more fish in Cook Inlet streams.
- We support changes to commissioner authority to create reasonable tools to manage the fisheries in Alaska. In Cook Inlet, the Commissioner has multiple ways to manage both sport and commercial fisheries. However, he does not presently have the authority to shorten the nets of the drift gillnet fleet. We support Proposal 129 to ensure that the Commissioner has this tool.
- The Commission supports a strong conservation corridor in Upper Cook Inlet. The Conservation Corridor allows fish to pass to Mat-Su Valley rivers and streams and encourages the rebuilding of those stocks. We support KRSA's proposal 104, which encourages more fish in the river, and 129, which gives the Commissioner the ability to shorten nets on the commercial drift fleet. We also support Proposals 127, 133, and 199 by the Mat-Su AC and the Mat-Su Fish and Wildlife Commission.