

Proposed Area M Adaptive Fleet Management Agreement 2023

Introduction

This proposed plan would be coordinated between the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G or Department), the Area M Seiners Association, and Concerned Area M Fishermen (CAMF).

The Department is the Alaska state agency with authority to protect, maintain, and improve the fish, game, and aquatic plant resources of the state, and manage their use and development in the best interest of the economy and the well-being of the people of the state, consistent with the sustained yield principle.

Area M Seiners Association is a non-profit organization which represents the Area M seine and set gillnet permit holders who participate in the June and post-June Area M salmon fisheries.

Concerned Area M Fishermen is a non-profit organization which represents the Area M drift gillnet permit holders who participate in the June and post-June Area M salmon fisheries.

The Area M June salmon fishery is a mixed-stock fishery that has existed since before Alaska statehood, focusing primarily on sockeye harvest. Chum and other salmon are intermixed with the sockeye runs and are also caught in the fishery. Area M June chum harvests have been relatively stable in recent years, except for 2021 when chum harvest was unusually high. This anomaly was presumably due to a strong Asian chum presence and new participants in the seine fleet, which has been rectified through fleet education.

In 2022, Area M Seiners conducted a unique and innovative self-management strategy that resulted in more than 50% reduction in chum harvest in June 2022 compared to June 2021.

Area M Seiners and CAMF believe that the self-management program can be improved further in 2023 and subsequent years with a higher fleet avoidance of chum hotspots and better accountability for each boat. In 2023, the program will have improved communications between fishermen and with processors by utilizing a web-based portal and a cell-phone app. Additionally, we are proposing collection of environmental and biological parameters that are expected to aid ADF&G in its understanding of chum salmon movements by area, time, and tides.

Area M Seiners and CAMF believe that the 2022 self-management program provides the best way to ensure that Area M June chum harvests are minimized to the extent practicable with the intent of allowing more CWAK-bound chum to pass through Area M. Self-management is more effective than a hard chum cap because a cap disincentivizes fleet cooperation and creates a race fishery. The self-management plan gives all boats in the fleet incentive to work together to avoid chum hotspots while allowing continued sockeye harvest.

Ensuring that the Area M June management plan retains identical or similar time/area to current management plan is a necessary condition that is critical for the self-management program's success. If there are severe time and area reductions, the self-management program cannot succeed and will likely lead to increased chum harvest due to individual fishing behavior.

Therefore, ADF&G, Area M Seiners and CAMF would agree to cooperate to reduce June chum harvest in the Area M June fishery using a program of information sharing and voluntary time and area closures in which the entire fleet and all processors participate.

Overview of the Self-Management Program

1. The success of the self-management program requires that the June Management Plan in 5 AAC 09.365 remains the same or similar to its current (Feb. 2023) state.
2. The self-management program will use on-the-water, near real-time information across the whole of the fishing area to monitor and reduce chum harvest in June, while still optimizing a sockeye fishery.
3. The fleet will utilize time/area closures that change throughout June in response to chum presence. This type of adaptive management requires vessels to cooperate, processors to provide daily reports, and vessels to move or stop fishing when directed to do so by the designated fisherman representative for a specified area (i.e. south Unimak).
4. A board of 7 active Seine fishermen makes decisions on fishing time and area during the June fishery using daily reports from processors and near real-time information from the fleet as the fishery occurred. This strategy applies to all boats in the seine fleet during June and all boats in the fleet agree to abide by the decisions of the managing board. The 3 processors and all seine boats registered agree to participate via separate agreement. Release of fishery harvest confidentially will be waived by the fleet and processors.
5. Operate a cooperative test fishery with ADF&G to assess chum salmon abundance at 3 locations across the South Peninsula for 2 days prior to and the first day of the June fishery, resulting in the loss of the first day of the June fishery for the seine fleet.
6. If the test fishery shows decreasing chum abundance and increasing sockeye abundance, the managing board will allow the fleet to fish a partial day on June 11th to gauge harvest with the entire fleet fishing.
7. As the June season progresses, the managing board will announce time reductions based on the previous days' chum harvest. All boats in the fleet will comply.
8. Also, as the season progresses, individual fleets at many locations may stand down separate from the rest of the fleet in other locations, to allow high concentrations of chum to pass through the area. This type of response can only be done with the flexibility of fleet management, cooperation, and responsive reporting. And most critically, time and area.
9. The time and area in the current June management plan allow the fleet the flexibility to take these actions without feeling that the fishery would be closed at a moment's notice. Processors and the communities reliant on sockeye landings also were able to better plan.
10. Genetic information collected by ADF&G in 2022 and associated harvest rates will also help in understanding the impacts of chum harvest in the SAP sockeye fishery.

Improvements and Considerations for 2023:

1. New portal and phone app for faster communications. ADF&G will have administrative access that will allow managers to track what is occurring on fishing grounds.

2. Confidentiality waivers by permit holders and processor agreements for infractions. The processors agree to enforce the self-management program including cutting off permit holders who do not comply.
3. Option for annual performance report to the Board of Fisheries and the public from the parties including ADF&G, presenting previous season's genetic analysis, stock composition and harvest rates; this provides the Board with the opportunity for annual review and oversight.
4. Institution of trigger by which the program would be enforced: if chum harvest equals or exceeds 450,000¹ by June 23rd, based on fish ticket information, the Commissioner may limit the South Unimak and Shumagin Islands June fishery for the remainder of June.
5. Release of seine-caught Chinook salmon
6. A 'chum pool' concept was utilized by the 3 processors buying salmon in Area M in 2022, thereby disincentivizing fishermen from targeting chum salmon. All chum harvested by the drift and seine fleets are aggregated by day, by weight, and by company into a drift pool and a seine pool, then paid out equally to the permit holders in each pool for that company. The chum pool would be continue to be used in 2023 season.
7. Inclusion of CAMF's drift fleet as follows:
 - a. Test fishery on June 8, 9 and 10; drift fleet stands down on June 10th
 - b. If all-gear harvest reaches 450,000 chum, drift fleet stops fishing at night (midnight-5AM) for remainder of June.
8. Set net fleet is exempt from any of these program restrictions.

¹ Rationale: This is based on the 6-year average chum harvest (2017-2022) by June 23rd, which is 468,685, with an additional reduction considering the unusually high chum harvest in 2021.