Submitted by Eva Burk

RC164

Minto/Nenana AC BOF Testimony
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Our AC voted unanimously to support proposal 140 to reduce fishing time in the Area M fishery. Specific issues concerned loss of subsistence, hatchery fish, size of boats, types of gear allowed, number of non-resident permits and total permits, loss of commercial fishing in the Interior, genetic studies, salmon migration routes, ecosystem impacts, teaching our youth, caring for our Elders, the size of the AYK region, Bering sea collapses, Alaskan seafood prices, food security, community wellbeing, and the number of villages and people impacted. We also did not receive ADFG's comments on proposal 140 until after our January meeting. We had to have another meeting and multiple phone calls to cover this proposal in detail.

Our villages lost a huge, irreplaceable part of our culture and economy when the fish plants in Nenana and Manley Hot Springs closed. Many fish camps along the Tanana River were abandoned as villagers traveled to other communities for work as they could not eke out a living from the river any longer. Although we empathize with other commercial fishermen, we all must sacrifice to keep the salmon returning to their spawning grounds. We are going to have to make a hard decision. Are we going to protect future generations of salmon and people? Or are we going to take the last salmon from the ecosystem for commercial purposes?

The watersheds of the AYK region make up 40 percent of Alaska. These lands and waters feed about 120,000 residents that live in the 118 communities within this region. This region also has some of the highest poverty rates in Alaska with limited economic opportunities, lack of housing, pronounced health disparities, and aging or failing infrastructure. The Yukon River is the 3rd longest river and has the fourth largest watershed in North America. The Y-K Delta is one of the largest in the world. In an area of this magnitude, commercial and subsistence fishing was destroyed in less than 3 decades. This demonstrates gross negligence and mismanagement of wild Alaskan salmon stocks. Historically, and currently, fisheries crash before science and regulations ever keep up. It appears that the science is questionable and there is no real understanding of how to manage salmon that have the longest migration routes in the world. That would mean managing the health of all the ecosystems along a 1,800+ mile journey, including Area M. What would it take to increase salmon runs in the AYK region? There are only

so many tools at our disposal and the first step would be to stop overfishing and allow salmon to pass through Area M to reach their spawning grounds. Area M is most definitely on the migratory path of the salmon. Whether we look at datasets from 1952-2016, 1990-2015, 2007-2009, or just 2022, CWAK chum have always had a significant presence in Area M. That presence has been declining while the presence of Asian hatchery chum has been increasing. That makes sense because Asia is releasing record numbers of hatchery chum. It makes sense because our AYK chum numbers are declining. The fish that Area M fishermen are catching are mostly Asian and CWAK. Based on the most recent study, if we were to look at only salmon Native to Alaska in this area in June, we would realize that about 40 percent of our Alaskan chum are from CWAK. How can we justify fishing these chum if we are seeing chum crash all over the AYK region? We are most definitely overfishing in this region if those fish are not being seen in their spawning streams. If these salmon do not make it their spawning grounds, there will not be fish in the future.

Overfishing, habitat destruction and pollution are affecting fisheries worldwide. When it comes to habitat destruction for the AYK region, we do not have mega infrastructure projects and large scale dams in our watershed areas yet. We do know the health of the ocean is in serious decline which is illustrated by the numerous collapses of various species in the Bering Sea, including crab and salmon, not to mention impacts to marine mammals and seabirds. Warming waters and marine heatwaves pose serious threats to our fisheries with risk and uncertainty. When fish were floating up dead in the AYK region from heat stress in 2019, Area M fishermen did not adjust their harvest that year or the following two years. In fact, somehow, over 2.2M chum were harvested in the Alaska Peninsula/Aleutian Islands and record catches were set in 2021. This lack of oversight during a critical period for AYK chum demonstrates our inability to manage overfishing along the CWAK chum migratory paths during ecosystem crisis.

We do not have control over warming waters, we have control of overfishing. We could not have predicted what happened in 2019 with scientific models or pre-season meetings. Our ecosystems and the habitat they provide are being significantly altered by climate change. The

end result is we still need to manage the risk and uncertainty. This is not the time to be defending our actions in one area while disregarding the entirety of the big picture. Without protection and conservation of the CWAK chum salmon that pass through Area M, we are putting entire ecosystems and watersheds at risk. We are endangering the other species that inhabit the AYK region and rely on the nutrient cycling the salmon provide. When salmon are low, predators like wolves and bears, attack more moose and caribou. With moose, caribou and salmon being the backbone of our food security, our entire food system is now at risk. Food security is a major issue in Alaska. Here we produce 60 percent of the nation's seafood but cannot even afford to buy it ourselves. King crab is $135 a lb in the restaurant. Bristol Bay sockeye is $19 a lb retail. These economic drivers, and therefore political as well, play more of a role in decision-making than science. If we followed science, we would understand chinook salmon is an indicator species, a keystone species. Their health is indicative of the health of their ecosystems. When they begin to decline, other species soon follow. We see many Chinook stocks listed as Stocks of Concern. What is the purpose of listing this stock? To acknowledge management changes need to be made but not make any that result in significant change or success? We know that most salmon are experiencing negative effects with the exception of Bristol Bay sockeye at this time. What are our concrete steps and actions to protect these wild salmon stocks? How are we upholding Alaska's constitution, statutes and regulations to manage salmon returns for wild stock conservation? Are we actually meeting our escapement goals? No, not for many years now. Are we meeting subsistence needs? No, not for many years now. Will commercial fishing ever exist again? Probably not.

Many scientists attempt to explain uncertainty as impacts from climate change. While this is valid, it does not excuse us from making extremely difficult decisions. Currently, NOAA is working to improve modeling and prediction of climate impacts on fisheries. However, predicting compound extreme events such as marine heatwaves, record air temperatures and record low water levels would be nearly impossible. Those types of algorithms take years to develop and ground-truth. We do not have enough salmon to wait for that. Maybe if we would have started that in the 80s but we did not even know that climate change was going to happen

so rapidly at that time. That goes to show that exercising caution and care should be of utmost importance. Without the presence of climate change, we annihilated commercial fishing in our region before the turn of the century. That was overfishing, not habitat destruction. We need to control the things that we can and prepare for the worst to come. We are not out of the woods yet.

The children. This is what I want to close with. We have been importing Bristol Bay sockeye into our Interior villages. While this is a kind gesture, it does not replace the chinook and chum salmon. With the donations from the State, we barely get enough to make a batch of strips. To make fish camp viable, we are now buying more fish to meet our subsistence needs. To keep our traditions alive and pass them onto future generations, we are spending good money to buy these fish. We have had to learn how to work with sockeye, changing all of the recipes that have been passed down for generations. Even though we are grateful, it's just not the same. The commercial fishing culture that many are testifying about here has already been lost for us, we are just trying to feed our people at this point. Now, we are learning to be farmers. Not that we necessarily want to, but our fish and game resources are less reliable and affordable. We are learning to adapt, maybe in some ways, being forced to.

We have so many questions. Will there be salmon for the future generations? Will they be wild or hatchery? Will Chinook and Chum return to the AYK region? What traditions will our children pass to theirs? I run the fish camp for our village. While this is a great responsibility and I enjoy bringing people together to process and preserve traditionally. I also am saddened that we cannot take these children out to set a net or run a fish wheel. How are they supposed to learn how to fish, when to fish, where to fish? Is their education and lifestyle less important than commercial fisheries in Area M? Our legacy can be an epic feat or an epic failure.

Proposal 140 is the compromise. To meet escapement goals, we have to let salmon through by modifying fishing gear, limiting openings, or total number of permits. It is the responsibility of ADFG to manage the fisheries for sustainable wild salmon stocks. This is in all of our best

interest. In times of uncertainty, there is more risk. We need to account for that and take conservative approaches. More salmon spawning in the AYK region means more salmon passing through Area M in the future. That should be our goal, as it is the state's legal responsibility.