

FINDING OF FACTS ON COOK INLET CENTRAL DISTRICT
GILL NET CLOSURE FOR PROTECTION OF
LATE RUN KENAI RIVER COHO SALMON

See also #77-27-FB,
#78-42-FB,
#79-0-FB,
#81-88-FB,
#81-90-FB,
#81-91-FB

1. The late Kenai River coho salmon run is a small but valuable fishery resource of the State. These coho salmon migrate primarily along the east shore of the Central District of Cook Inlet and begin entering the Kenai River in mid-August. The run continues through early November.

The late run Kenai River coho salmon stock is relatively small in terms of numbers of fish. For example, commercial set net catches of coho salmon in the Upper subdistrict of the Central District after August 15; i.e. late run Kenai River coho salmon, have ranged from 38,170 in 1963 to 5,730 in 1978 and have averaged 13,470 for the period 1966 through 1978. Recreational harvests of this stock were minimal prior to 1976, and since then, have ranged from approximately 3,280 to 9,640. Recreational fishing effort for this stock has generally increased over the past several years. Subsistence harvest of late run Kenai River coho salmon have remained fairly constant from 1971 through 1977 with an average catch of approximately 1,000 fish. However, subsistence harvest of this stock increased sharply in 1978 to approximately 3,300 coho salmon. The number of subsistence permits ranged from 21 to 104 prior to 1978. In 1978, after an early closure on the commercial fishery, the subsistence permits increased to 297.

During 1981, there was a court ordered fishery on the late coho salmon run into the Kenai River. This was called a "non-commercial gill net fishery." A total of 1,108 permits were issued which is the highest recorded. This set gill net fishery captured approximately 11,300 coho salmon which approaches historical average commercial set net catch on the east side beaches of 13,470. The 1981 late run sport harvest was 6,370 coho salmon, which is slightly below the historical mean of 6,450. The recreational catch per hour was 0.12. This is a 52% reduction from the catch per hour of 0.25, which was observed in 1980 when there was virtually no gill net fishery on late Kenai River coho salmon stocks. Finally, the 1980 recreational harvest of 9,450 was nearly 50% greater than the 1981 catch.

2. The commercial harvest of the late run Kenai River coho salmon stock during the period 1966 through 1978, represented a relatively small component of the total upper Cook Inlet commercial catch of coho salmon; i.e., approximately 7%. Similarly, the commercial harvest of this coho salmon stock has averaged only 0.5% of the upper Cook Inlet's commercial harvest of all salmon species during the period 1966 through 1978. It was eliminated in 1979 because of concern for the stock in view of the increasing sport fishery and to conform to the Board's Comprehensive Management Policy for Upper Cook Inlet salmon fisheries, now codified in 5 AAC 21.363.
3. Precise estimates of the late run Kenai River coho salmon run strength, either in the Central District or in the Kenai River, are

not possible at this time. Coho salmon are usually counted more accurately once they have entered their spawning streams. However, based on radio tagging, the late run appears to use the mainstem Kenai River for spawning. Unfortunately, the glacial nature of the Kenai River results in such turbidity that these Coho salmon cannot be counted visually. Coho salmon migrating up the Kenai River exhibit a lateral distribution across the river which eliminates the use of sonar equipment for accurate enumeration.

Consequently, the Board of Fisheries has concluded that to allow a harvest on this small stock of fish using highly efficient gear types which could harvest a significant number of these fish in a short period of time, in certain years would not be consistent with sound conservation principles.

4. Because rod and reel is a relatively inefficient harvest method, compared to more efficient harvest methods, such as gill nets, rod and reel catches are made slowly over a longer period of time which allows ongoing evaluation of catch rates and catch levels. This ongoing evaluation serves to protect the sustained yield of the stock.
5. The Board further finds that the amount of recreational rod and reel use in the State, and the Kenai area in particular, has increased and will continue to do so. Fishing effort on the Kenai River has increased from 122,000 man days in 1977 to 172,000 man days in 1980, and the Kenai River system currently supports 17% of the State's total sport fishing effort.
6. As the State's population continues to rise, the number of recreational fishermen will continue to increase. The bulk of the increase will be in the South Central region, with the use focused on the Kenai River system.
7. Even if a small quota of the late Kenai River coho salmon run were to be allocated to a non-commercial set gill net fishery, under the heading of personal use, the Board has no authority to limit the participants to individuals who had been involved in what was formerly called subsistence fishing in the area in the past.
8. Individuals who had been involved in what was formerly called subsistence fishing in the area, and in the court ordered non-commercial set gill net fishery in 1981 will not be deprived of access to salmon if such fishery is not continued, because they will have available the rod and reel and dip net fisheries on the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers.

Consequently, the Board of Fisheries has concluded that it is in the public interest to reserve the late Kenai River coho salmon run for the increasing recreational fishery on the Kenai River system. This will maximize the benefit to the greatest number of people who will have the opportunity to participate

in the sports fishery than could ever be allowed to ultimately fish with gill nets.

ADOPTED: Anchorage, Alaska
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VOTE: 6-1

Nick Szabo, Chairman
Alaska Board of Fisheries