

# Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

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## Meeting Summary

**August 27, 2013**

Meeting called to order at 10:02 am and adjourned at 12:50 pm at ADF&G in Bethel. Eight full voting members were present and a quorum was established.

### **AGENDA ITEMS:**

Continuing Business:

- Run assessment and management actions.

Old Business Discussion Topics:

- Unalakleet Chinook Summit
- End of year strategy meeting

New Business Discussion Topics:

- Development of a KRSMWG Mission Statement – Mark Leary/Dave Cannon
- Starting the season closed and then open
- Windows schedules
- Gear restrictions
  - Mesh size
  - Net length
  - Use of set nets
  - Dip nets
- Addressing quality of escapement
- Voluntary reductions
- Attaining more than an advisory role
- Limit to Federally Qualified Users of the Kuskokwim Region
- Additional recommendations
- Bycatch update and notes from YR DFA By-catch Teleconference- Casie (if time allows)

**WORKING GROUP ACTION ITEMS:** none

### **WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:**

1. To accept the agenda as amended (accepted by majority vote).
2. To have the Working Group write a letter to Oscarville, Napaskiak, ONC to request that we work together to address the identified choke points of concern specifically Napaskiak/Oscarville narrow and Joe Pete drift. (8 yeas, 0 nays).
3. To submit a letter the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council describing the low Chinook returns on the Kuskokwim and request that the Council continue looking at reducing bycatch (9 yeas, 0 nays).

***NOTE: The summary materials below were prepared for distribution by members of the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group***

The Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group met on August 27, 2013 to discuss potential solutions to address the record low escapements observed in 2013 and the allocation issues described by middle and upper river communities. This document is a meeting summary with a request to comment on the draft mission statement for the Working Group as well as the management recommendations.

The following draft mission statement was proposed and discussed:

***The Mission of the Kuskokwim Salmon Working Group is to promote the sustainability of our salmon populations for the People of the entire Kuskokwim River from its' mouth to the headwaters. We recognize the importance of salmon to all user groups, including, in order of priority: Subsistence fishers, Commercial fishers, and Sports Fishers. We also recognize that the ultimate priority is the salmon themselves and that ensuring adequate escapement must take the highest priority above all user groups.***

Working Group members recommended presenting the draft mission statement to communities and tribes for further input (the Fish & Wildlife Service will help distribute it as they visit numerous villages in the coming months).

A resulting 20 recommendations were described as possible solutions to address the Chinook crisis and to better manage the Kuskokwim king salmon run. Positive and negative aspects of many of the recommendations were discussed. Working Group members pointed out that solutions would probably involve a combination of two or more of the recommendations and would require the involvement of all stakeholders (i.e., the agencies and the fishers). These recommendations followed by a brief summary of positive and negative aspects discussed are being made available to the public in a separate Excel file; the positives and negatives are limited to those discussed at the meeting and may not be complete. Public input on recommendations is being sought.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Starting the season closed to Chinook fishing and open when the data tells us that the abundance is adequate.
2. Starting the season on a fishing schedule.
3. Gear Restrictions
  - a. Mesh Size
  - b. Net length
  - c. Depth
  - d. Set Net Only
  - e. Dip nets
4. Addressing Quality of Escapement
5. Voluntary Reductions
6. Attaining more than an advisory role
7. Limiting to Federally Qualified Users (rural residents)
8. Addressing Choke Points
9. Permits Systems
10. Permit System for Bethel only
11. Close king salmon fishing for 5 years.
12. Stop all commercial fishing on the Kuskokwim
13. Establishing quotas based on a percent of the number of fish present.
14. Schedules for the Lower River Only
15. Combine a fishing schedule with gear restrictions.
16. Tier II

17. Establish Amounts Necessary for Subsistence (ANS) for the Lower, Middle, and Upper River rather than one ANS for the whole river.
18. Adopt an Optimum Escapement Goal
19. Establish an Inriver Goal
20. Use of the Elders Fishery

Additional recommendations: The Working Group voted to submit a letter to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council to describe the Chinook declines on the Kuskokwim and ask the Council to continue to reduce Chinook bycatch. Additionally the Working Group is seeking a volunteer among Working Group members to testify before the NPFMC at the October meeting in Anchorage.

Please send comment or resolutions to the Working Group Co-Chairs by email or contact a Co-Chair. The most valuable part of your comments is the rationale. Please provide an explanation for your position including details such as pros, cons and feasibility about each management strategy. You may use the format in the attached table to describe comment on the current recommendation or to add additional recommendations.

Sincerely,

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*Note: This summary was reviewed by the Working Group Co-Chairs and was reviewed by a Working Group member who reviewed the summary against an audio recording of the meeting.*

Recommendation	Pro	Con	Discussions
1. Starting the season closed and then open when the data tells us that the abundance is adequate to meet escapement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lessens the risk of taking action too late to meet escapement</li> <li>• Better chance of meeting minimum escapement</li> <li>• Protects early fish bound for headwaters</li> <li>• Errs on the side of conservation for the kings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has the potential to lessen the Bethel Test Fish too's ability to project escapement (the current model assumes average subsistence harvest)</li> <li>• May limit opportunity on sheefish</li> <li>• Risks missed opportunity</li> <li>• May miss early drying weather</li> </ul>	Mixed feelings. Called for in resolution from the Lower Kalskag and Chuathbaluk. The Working Group will seek further public input.
2. Starting the season on a fishing schedule.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows for more equitable harvest along the river</li> <li>• People like schedules but don't like short notice</li> <li>• Can take into account densities of fish and how difficult it is to fish in that area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past windows schedule didn't reduce harvest</li> <li>• Increases the number of people on the river at the same time (combat fishing)</li> <li>• Takes a lot of work and planning to develop fair and equitable schedule that works along the river.</li> </ul>	Some support. A suggestion was to combine a schedule with gear restrictions to be effective.
3. Gear Restrictions			
a. Mesh Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6" mesh harvests Chinook across the spectrum of size classes – addresses quality of escapement concerns</li> <li>• Effective conservation measure for Chinook</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not an effective conservation measure in the beginning of season when there's primarily Chinook present because 6" harvests more kings</li> <li>• Not everyone has a 6" mesh</li> </ul>	Some Support.
b. Net length	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shorter nets would let some fish go by (allow to make it up river) while providing opportunity</li> </ul>		Some Support.
c. Depth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May let some fish and large fish to make it up river while providing opportunity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are some very deep areas on the river (ex. mouth) that would make it very difficult to fish</li> <li>• Hardship for those who don't have that size net</li> </ul>	
d. Set Net Only	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allows mid river fish to pass and make it up river while providing opportunity</li> <li>• Allows for harvest of mixed species</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not all areas have set net sites especially near Bethel with large population</li> </ul>	Some support. Recommend taking to communities to determine where set nets are <u>not a gear option</u> .
e. Dip nets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selective and give the option to release kings alive</li> <li>• Can control the number harvested</li> <li>• Maybe allow for commercial harvest on other species</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsure if possible in strong tidally influenced areas</li> <li>• A lot of work and not efficient</li> </ul>	More discussion needed.

Recommendation	Pro	Con	Discussions
<p>4. Addressing Quality of Escapement</p> <p>Definition: Refers to a decline in the size, age, and/or sex ratio which translates into a decline in productivity. In other words, larger eggs leading to more fish. Update from ADFG: There is a paper coming out from ADFG that describes a decline in the size of Chinook</p> <p>The last few years on the Kuskokwim we have seen more age 4 fish and fewer age 5 fish.</p>			<p>Options for addressing?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mesh size restrictions</li> <li>• Use of fish wheels with boxes to release females</li> </ul>
<p>5. Voluntary Reductions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self imposed</li> <li>• People can adjust to weather and harvesting how much you can handle in a day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Despite outreach efforts by the Working Group, it hasn't resulting in decreased harvest</li> <li>• What if there's just not enough fish to go around</li> </ul>	<p>Some support. Many felt that it didn't work included in formal resolutions</p>
<p>6. Attaining more than an advisory role</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People may be more accepting of regulations</li> <li>• Worked in to other Co-management systems</li> </ul>		<p>Some support. No formal motion. Suggestions to appeal to State and</p>
<p>7. Limiting to Federally Qualified Users (rural residents)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Means will be no commercial fishing until lifted</li> <li>• Intended to limit the number of people fishing; hence the number of kings harvested</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Savings are likely minimal</li> <li>• Explained by Federal Inseason Manager limiting fishing to rural residents does not stop non-rural residents from taking fish home that was caught by relatives or other rural residents. i.e. no savings.</li> <li>• Means there will be no commercial fishing</li> <li>• Federal managers do not have the staff or capacity to manage</li> <li>• The Working Group is an advisor to the State not the Federal Government</li> </ul>	<p>Recommended by formal resolution by the Village of Lower Kalskag and the Native Village of Chuathbaluk.</p>
<p>8. Addressing Choke Points</p>			<p>Formal recommendation was to work with the tribal councils in Bethel, Oscarville, Napaskiak and surrounding area to address the choke points in the Oscarville/Napaskiak area and the Joe Pete's drift.</p>

Recommendation	Pro	Con	Discussions
9. Permits Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limit the number of fishers</li> <li>• Limits the number of fish harvested</li> <li>• More control and ability to manage</li> </ul>		
10. Permit System for			
11.5 year closure for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moratoriums worked for geese and moose.</li> </ul>		
12. Stop all commercial fishing on			
13. Establishing quotas based on a			
14. Schedule Lower			
15. Combine a fishing schedule with			
16. Tier II			
17. Establish Amounts Necessary for Subsistence for	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Addresses middle and upriver allocation concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not address the problem in season - is only a report card after the season</li> </ul>	
18. Adopt an Optimum Escapement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Allow more kings to pass Bethel (above the ADFG adopted drainage wide goal)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That additional fish are not available for subsistence</li> </ul>	
19. Establish an Inriver Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•May address allocation issue by allowing more kings past Bethel that's above what's need for escapement to ensure adequate subsistence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty managing for that</li> <li>• Difficulty in determining that number</li> </ul>	
20. Use of the Elders			

# Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

P.O. Box 1467 • Bethel, AK 99559 • 907-543-2433 • 907-543-2021 fax

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September 13, 2013

Dear Tribal Councils and community members,

The Kuskokwim River has experienced poor Chinook salmon returns since 2010. We would like your council and community involved to help address this issue. By taking action now we are working to try to prevent what we've seen in other areas of the State like Norton Sound and the Yukon River which have experienced dramatic declines and poor returns for over a decade.

\*Despite an expectation for this declining trend to reverse, we do not anticipate Chinook salmon to rebound to historical numbers in the near future.

\*During 2013, the number of Chinook salmon which reached the spawning grounds could very well be the lowest return on record.

\*Tributary escapement goals for Chinook salmon were not met nor is it likely that the drainage-wide escapement goal for the whole river was met.

\*All but one of these tributaries had the lowest return on record.

\*The number of Chinook salmon that reached tributary spawning grounds were in some cases by far the lowest recorded escapements on record.

\*The Kogrukluk River, the large Chinook salmon producer on the Kuskokwim, had a preliminary escapement estimate that was just 35% of the lower end of the established escapement goal.

\*The Takona River saw less than 100 Chinook salmon this year on the spawning ground. Many of the tributaries on the Kuskokwim have had multiple years, some up to five consecutive years, of poor Chinook salmon returns.

\*The declining trend over time is of a conservation concern.

\*The Tuluksak River has now seen seven consecutive years of drastically low returns and the escapement goal was discontinued in 2012.

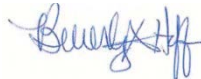


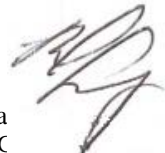

This adds up to a very serious concern for the future of our Kuskokwim king salmon and we need your help.

Low returns of Chinook salmon had a drastic effect on our, upriver communities who had a difficult time catching Chinook salmon and meeting their subsistence needs. This is not the first year where middle and upriver communities have suffered. The combination of low Chinook salmon returns and not meeting subsistence needs in this and past years for communities to call for action. In response to this conservation concern and the inability to meet subsistence needs - despite exercising due diligence, the Native Village of Napaimute along with the Native Village of Chuathbaluk, the Village of Lower Kalskag and the Kuskokwim Native Association have all passed resolutions requesting that the Alaska Department of Fish & Game and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service take significant management measures to address the declining Chinook salmon returns in the Kuskokwim River. Resolutions from the Village of Lower Kalskag and the Native Village of Chuathbaluk specifically recommend closing two identified choke points of Oscarville/Napaskiak and Joe Pete's during the Chinook salmon migration. We believe closing these areas will increase the Chinook salmon escapement upriver.

The Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group met on August 27<sup>th</sup> to discuss management recommendations to address the king salmon conservation concern. Identifying and addressing choke points in the river was a recommendation previously made at Working Group meetings and was made a priority in resolutions from middle river communities. The choke points of Oscarville/Napaskiak and Joe Pete's area identified very narrow areas in the river with a concentrated number of fishers and high fishing pressure that can greatly reduce the number of Chinook salmon that pass by. The purpose of addressing choke points in the river is to increase the number of Chinook salmon that are allowed to pass upriver of Bethel and make it to headwaters spawning areas as well as allow for more equal harvest opportunity for communities upriver of Bethel. Closing these identified choke point areas to Chinook salmon fishing entirely or to limit Chinook salmon fishing to set net only sites has been suggested. Many other recommendations have been made and it is likely that a number of sacrifices by various communities and fishers will be required to get more Chinook salmon on the spawning grounds and provide more equal opportunity to all of the subsistence users along the river.

The Working Group voted to contact communities in the adjacent areas, identify their concerns, and to work together to find solutions. Addressing these choke point areas is of importance. Your communities are most directly impacted by these recommendations and we feel that the first step should be to work with Tribal Councils and local residents to find a solution to our common goal which is to preserve our Chinook salmon resource for future generations. We would like to welcome your communities to respond and participate in future management discussions.

Sincerely,

				
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Cc Oscarville Traditional Council  
Cc Napaskiak Tribal Council  
Cc Orutsararmiut Native Council



# Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

P.O. Box 1467 • Bethel, AK 99559 • 907-543-2433 • 907-543-2021 fax

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September 6, 2013

Re: Agenda Item C-6

Mr. Eric Olson, Chair  
North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
605 West 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 306  
Anchorage, AK 99501

Dear Mr. Olson:

The Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (Working Group) was formed in 1988 by the Alaska Board of Fisheries to provide stakeholders an active role in salmon management and works to sustain our salmon resources. The Working Group consists of voting members representing Elders and subsistence fishers along the river, processors, commercial fishers, sport fishers, Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Committees and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. We are writing on behalf of the Working Group to inform you about our Chinook salmon conservation and food security crisis on our river and to request that the Council continue to reduce Chinook salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea.

Healthy and abundant Chinook salmon are essential to the cultural, nutritional, and economic well-being and way of life on the Kuskokwim River. The subsistence salmon fishery in the Kuskokwim is one of the largest and most important subsistence fisheries in North America. The Kuskokwim River has experienced below average Chinook salmon returns, missed escapement goals, and subsistence restrictions since 2010.

In 2010 the Kuskokwim River experienced the lowest estimated total run and lowest spawning escapement of Chinook salmon on record. Late subsistence restrictions were imposed to protect tributaries of concern. In 2011, the Kuskokwim River experienced the second lowest estimated total run and spawning escapement of Chinook salmon. The Kwethluk and Tuluksak rivers did not meet Chinook salmon sustainable escapement goals for the fourth and fifth consecutive years, respectively. The George River did not meet its escapement goal in 2011, nor had the escapement goal been met in three of the previous four years. Only one tributary (of four with weir based escapement goals), achieved the escapement goal in 2011. Pre-season actions were taken on those tributaries experiencing chronic low returns. In-season, a late three-day subsistence closure to protect tributaries was followed by a Federal Management Action which closed subsistence salmon fishing within the Federal Conservation Unit for an additional three days.

In 2012, the Kuskokwim River experienced a new lowest return on record with an preliminary estimated return of Chinook salmon and the lowest subsistence harvest of Chinook salmon on record of about 20,000 (about 1/4 of the average subsistence harvest). Escapement objectives were generally achieved, but only at the expense of the subsistence harvest. In 2012 there were 35 days of restrictions including 12 continuous days of closure, and a significant reduction of subsistence harvest. On September 13, 2012, the Acting U.S. Secretary of Commerce Rebecca Blank declared a commercial fisheries disaster for the Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon for 2011-2012 in response to extremely low returns.

For the 2013, a new drainage-wide escapement goal of 65,000-120,000 Chinook salmon was established based on a Kuskokwim Chinook salmon run reconstruction. This new goal is much lower than the average escapement of about 150,000 Chinook. Escapement goals for the tributaries—the George, Kogruklu, and Kwethuk Rivers—were reduced to be in proportion with new drainage wide goal and the Tuluksak escapement goal was eliminated.

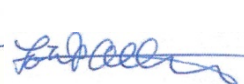
In 2013, Chinook salmon escapement could very well be by far the lowest Chinook salmon escapement on record. The Bethel Test Fishery was by far the lowest on record. Not a single weir based tributary escapement goal was met for Chinook salmon nor is it likely that the drainage-wide escapement goal will have been met. Furthermore, all but one tributary had the lowest return on record. The Kogruklu River, the large Chinook Chinook salmon producer on the Kuskokwim, had a preliminary escapement estimate that was 35% of the lower end of the escapement goal range. Pre-season tributary restrictions were implemented similar to 2011 and 2012 and late subsistence gear restrictions were imposed. The Working Group called an Emergency meeting to impose restrictions and a post-season meeting to develop solutions to the king salmon crisis. Several middle river tribes have signed formal resolutions calling for conservation measures.

Given the conservation and food security concerns on the Kuskokwim River, we are requesting that the Council continue to work to reduce Chinook salmon bycatch. Considering the continued poor returns of Chinook salmon, failure to meet escapement goals, an Chinook salmon crisis's of 2012 and 2013 our stocks cannot afford impacts from additional known sources of mortality, such as bycatch. At this point in time, every single fish counts, and it would be devastating to our runs if the 60,000 Chinook salmon permissible under the current cap were caught as bycatch. Bycatch must be reduced to protect Western Alaska Chinook salmon and to provide for the nutritional, cultural, and economic needs of the Kuskokwim communities.

Sincerely,  
Sincerely,



Beverly Hoffman  
KRSMWG co-chair  
543-3239  
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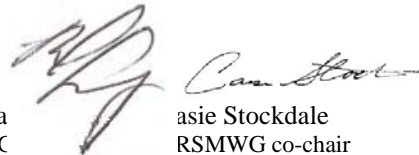
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Casie Stockdale  
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**WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:**

<b>MEMBER SEAT:</b>	<b>NAME:</b>
DOWNRIVER ELDER	James Charles
UPRIVER ELDER	<i>Vacant</i>
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Dave Cannon
UPRIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mark Leary
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	<i>Absent</i>
MEMBER AT LARGE	<i>Absent</i>
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Ray Collins
YK DELTA RAC	Bob Aloysius
COMMERCIAL FISHING	Charlie Brown
SPORT FISHING	LaMont Albertson
PROCESSOR	<i>Absent</i>
ADF&G	Kevin Schaberg
CHAIR	Bev Hoffman

<b>Other Participants:</b>	
<p><u>ADF&amp;G Comm. Fish:</u> Aaron Tiernan, Chris Shelden, Kevin Schaberg, Colton Lipka  <u>Sport Fish:</u> John Chythlook  <u>Subsistence Division:</u> Hiroko Ikuta, Jeff Park, Kitty Wilson  <u>Federal Subsistence Liason:</u> Jennifer Yuhas,</p>	
<p><u>USFWS:</u> Steve Miller, Robert Sundown, Ken Harper, James Boersma  <u>OSM:</u> Don Rivard,</p>	
<p>Kate Schaberg (Georgetown)            Dan Gillikin (KNA)            Tim Andrew (AVCP)            Roberta Chavez (ONC)            Sophie Enok            Adolph Lupie            Willy Andrew            Elena Bunion            Robert Enok            Anna Andrew            Peter Miller</p>	<p>Karen Gillis (BSFA)            Art Nelson (BSFA)            Barbara Carlson (Upriver Subsistence alternate)            John W. Andrew (Downriver Elder Alternate)            Charlie Charlie            Ron Simon            Paul Lupie            Meagan Leary            Casie Stockdale (Lower River subsistence alternate)            Greg Hoffman Jr. (Commercial fisher alternate)</p>

**GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS:**

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (**ADF&G**), Orutsararmiut Native Council (**ONC**), Kuskokwim Native Association (**KNA**), Association of Village Council Presidents (**AVCP**), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (**USFWS**), Bethel Test Fishery project (**BTF**), Catch Per Unit Effort (**CPUE**), Coastal Village Seafoods (**CVS**), ADF&G Commercial Fisheries Division (**CF**), ADF&G Sport Fisheries Division (**SF**), Regional Advisory Council (**RAC**), Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (**KRSMWG**, **Working Group**, or **WG**), Sustainable Escapement Goal (**SEG**), Biological Escapement Goal (**BEG**), Management Objective (**MO**), Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence (**ANS**), Emergency Order (**EO**), Bering Sea Fishermen’s Association (**BSFA**)