

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

1 (800) 315-6338 (MEET) Code: 58756# (KUSKO)

ADF&G Bethel toll free: 1 (855) 933-2433

Month Day, 2022

On Wednesday, August 17th, 2022, the KRSMWG meeting was called to order at 10:02 a.m. and adjourned at 12:55 p.m. Meeting time was approximately 2 hours and 53 minutes. A quorum was established with 8 full voting members and 1 alternate in attendance. Barbara Carlson chaired the meeting. The primary topic of this meeting was the recent closure of the Kuskokwim River to fishing for coho salmon due to the low returns.

AGENDA ITEMS AND SUMMARY INFORMATION:

A. USFWS/KRITFC UPDATE: *Audio for this update begins at 11:25 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

- Boyd Blihovde (USFWS) gives an update on actions taken since the previous Working Group meeting on August 11th. KRITFC and USFWS had met about taken special action on the river to conserve coho salmon but decided to monitor the situation and take no action. The reasons Mr. Blihovde cites for this decision were based on ADF&G's announcement to close the river and the closure was more liberal than had previously been proposed which allowed for some non-salmon fishing in non-spawning tributaries and non-flowing waters. USFWS and KRITFC also felt that openings for federally qualified subsistence users before September 15th would not be appropriate with the low coho salmon numbers. USFWS lacks the resources to manage the fishery this late in the season and felt that there was no reason to take over management since a USFWS closure would likely have the same effect. Mr. Blihovde acknowledges that the low run of salmon this year has created a crisis situation for headwaters and upriver communities, however he feels that the restrictions are necessary.
- Kevin Whitworth (KRITFC) recognizes a new volunteer, Andrew Magel and expresses his concern for the small coho salmon return, especially in upriver communities that have not had the opportunity to fish. Mr. Whitworth adds that there is a lot of pressure over the closures, and he worries about the lack of subsistence opportunities as multiple salmon species have had low returns and the closures limit people's opportunity to target whitefish.

B. ADF&G MANAGEMENT ACTIONS UNDER CONSIDERATION: *Audio for this update begins at 24:20 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

- Nick Smith (ADFG) said that he had no further management recommendations and goes on to explain the recent announcement that ADFG put out closing the flowing waters of the Kuskokwim River to fishing for coho salmon. Mr. Smith said that numbers for the coho run are still low and that he would like to see a CPUE of 1,700 from Bethel Test Fish by August 24th before considering any fishing openings. He expresses that he does not want to keep the fishery closed but feels it is necessary.
- There is considerable discussion following Mr. Smith's recommendations. Kevin Whitworth asks about mesh size restrictions or gear type exceptions to the closure, however Mr. Smith states that he does not currently have the ability to restrict coho for different gear types but that there is a proposal that has been submitted to the Board of Fisheries to change that. Rod and reel fishing is still open to other species, but coho salmon must be released and explains that there is no harvestable surplus based on the numbers that the assessment projects have seen so far. Mr. Smith does have the authority to open targeted areas for limited time. Jim Simon (KRITFC) asks

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if an emergency petition could be submitted to allow for those management tools, but Chuck Brazil (ADFG) explains that the low returns were not anticipated and that it is too late for an emergency petition to affect anything this season. *Audio for this discussion begins at 26:35 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

C. PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:

- Martin Nikolai (Kwethluk) makes a comment that he feels most people on the river would support limited openings for upriver communities. Mr. Nikolai also expresses concern for sportfishing and catch and release of coho salmon stating that it is not healthy for the fish to be handled. He had hoped that sportfishing would be completely closed, instead of only closed to chum and coho salmon. *Audio for this discussion begins at 38:00 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- John Simon (Bethel) expresses his frustration over the closure and explains that he is not willing to break the law, but he is a dog musher and his dogs and him have a diet of mostly fish. The closures will limit his ability to feed himself and his dogs. He recommends setnet openings and reasons that not many coho salmon could be caught and gas prices make it prohibitive to driftnet fish. He said that he is concerned about the low return of salmon, but he is trying to gather food. *Audio for this update begins at 46:15 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Denny Thomas (Crooked Creek) expresses his frustration as well. Mr. Thomas states that the harvest numbers are not the same in his village and upriver as it is down river and they have not had a chance to harvest silver salmon since they had not made it up that far yet and he feels that the village received no notice before the closure to plan. Mr. Thomas stresses that the villages depend on the fish for food, and they need an opportunity to put some fish away. People may get a moose, but there are no jobs in the winter in the village. *Audio for this update begins at 53:35 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Chariton Epchook (Kwethluk, Inc.) said he felt that there should be opportunity for upriver and downriver families since many have not yet reached their needs. *Audio for this update begins at 1:46:10 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

D. CONTINUING BUSINESS:

- Subsistence Reports: Lower River, Middle River, Upper River, ONC In-season Subsistence Report
 - Lower River
 - Albert Kawagely (Bethel) reports that he has not been out fishing but he hopes that there are some openings for people who still want to jar and for half-dried fish. Mr. Kawagely expresses his concern for people who have not yet caught enough fish, especially upriver families. *Audio for this update begins at 58:15 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
 - Avery Hoffman (Bethel) said that many people in the area went out over the weekend to catch what they could before the closure. Mr. Hoffman said that most people he heard from reported low catch amounts with the largest catch being 30 all day. He said there was mostly Bethel boats out. *Audio for this update begins at 1:00:15 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

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- Mike Williams (Akiak) said that he has seen very little effort in his area. Mr. Williams said he had heard from people in Tuluksak who were able to get what they needed in one drift. Akiak school participated in a project on the 16th and put out a setnet and caught some silver salmon. Mr. Williams feels the first surge of the coho salmon run is past and he is expecting a second charge. Mr. Williams expressed his approval of the federal and KRITFC management of chinook and chum salmon and believes that USFWS has more flexibility in what management tools they are able to use for salmon conservation. He felt that the original proposal of closing the river until September 30th was too much and although he is concerned for the coho salmon's low numbers he is also concerned for upriver people who did not have time to prepare for the closures and are left little options to fish for what they need. Mr. Williams recommends some openings for the mainstem and not just the tributaries. He is concerned for people's health, but his main concern is for the people upriver. *Audio for this update begins at 1:02:10 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Middle River
 - Walter Morgan (Lower Kalskag) said that most people had not been fishing. However, one person he spoke to said they had caught 27 silver salmon in one drift. Mr. Morgan described how people in Kalskag wait and let other salmon species pass by in times of conversation because they know they can fish the silvers. Mr. Morgan goes on to express his frustration over the closure and lack of opportunity and feels that management is not listening. He feels that sport-fishing should be more restricted. *Audio for this update begins at 1:11:45 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
 - Allen Simeon (Aniak) said that he had spoken to someone who fished on the North side of the Aniak box before the closure and caught 17 silver salmon in one drift and another fisherman in Upper Kalskag who caught 28 silvers. He spoke to other local people that had good catches as well. Mr. Simeon feels that the fish are here, people are desperate and does not agree with the closure. Denny Thomas (Crooked Creek) added that they had been catching good numbers of silver salmon by rod and reel. *Audio for this update begins at 1:15:35 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Upper River
 - Barbara Carlson (Sleetmute) said that she ran the fish wheel at Midway for the 24 hours prior to the closure when she shut it down due to high water. Ms. Carlson said that the numbers of fish caught were increasing and 37 coho salmon and 20 whitefish were caught in the last 9 hours the fish wheel was in. that the fish wheel was in operation. Rod and reel fishing has not been
- Headwaters

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- Kevin Whitworth (McGrath) said he had been setnet fishing on the weekends before the closure with 4 ½ inch mesh to target whitefish. Mr. Whitworth said that he has been sharing his catch with 20 families. He said that he had been catching between 10-15 whitefish per day. Mr. Whitworth had caught his first silver salmon on August 6th, which is early for McGrath, and has been catching about 2-3 per day. He said that silver salmon usually start passing McGrath around August 13-15. Mr. Whitworth has still been seeing chum salmon. He says he prefers to fish the early season because they are the best tasting. After September 15th the fish become soft and inedible. He is disappointed in the closures and worries for his community. *Audio for this update begins at 1:23:20 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Dan Esai (Nikolai) spoke about how people in the headwaters have struggled this year with high waters, low fish returns, no berries, and now fishing closures. Mr. Esai reminds everyone that the state announced closures were announced after USFWS took no action. Mr. Esai said that he had not heard from one family in the headwaters that have met their subsistence needs. He hopes that the Working Group can fine tune the closure and provide some opportunity to people in the headwaters. *Audio for this update begins at 1:29:40 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Overview of the Kuskokwim River salmon run assessment
 - Sean Larson (ADFG) gives an update of Bethel Test Fish, the weirs and sonar assessments. Some highlights include that the coho salmon caught by Bethel Test Fish is the lowest that the department has seen. Numbers at both the Kogrukluuk and Kwethluk weirs is below average, with the Kogrukluuk weir have the lowest counts on record and most likely will not meet the escapement goal. Sonar counts are also low and corroborates the weir and BTF numbers.
 - *Audio for this update begins at 1:34:10 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
 - There are some questions from Working Group members immediately after Mr. Larson's update about how fish are counted at the various projects and how the numbers of coho salmon have progressed since the numbers were published and the meeting date. Mr. Larson and Keegan Birchfield from the sonar project answered the questions.
 - NVN Report
 - Dan Gilikin gave a brief report during the subsistence reports. Mr. Gilikin spoke about how some people have done alright fishing for silvers and others have not. He noticed that people seem to be doing better in the clear tributaries and believes the fish may be staging to head upriver. Mr. Gilikin reported in the last 10 years of harvest of coho salmon in the upper river area from Crooked Creek to Talida averages about 2500 fish

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annually. *Audio for this update begins at 1:21:25 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

E. OLD BUSINESS:

- There was no old business addressed at this meeting

F. NEW BUSINESS:

- There was no new business addressed at this meeting

G. COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:

The meeting was adjourned at 12:55 p.m.

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

Motion 1: Approve the agenda as written. *Passed (Unanimous)*

- *Audio for this motion begins at 10:10 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

Motion 2: To open the Kuskokwim River to all fishing upriver of Aniak. The Working Group acknowledged that by passing this motion they are prioritizing harvest over escapement. *Passed (8 yesses, 0 nos)*

- Motion made by Allen Simeon and seconded by Walter Morgan.
- *Audio for this update begins at 1:47:00 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Allen Simeon (Aniak) feels that because the upper river and headwaters average harvest such a low percentage of fish the river should be opened to fishing upriver of Aniak. Others from upriver echoed this sentiment and felt that allowing upriver families to harvest what they needed it would have little impact on the total number of silver salmon and escapement numbers. One member of the public stated that he would appreciate opportunities in the lower river. Nick Smith (ADFG) made a statement regarding the lack of harvestable surplus of coho salmon and pointed out that the harvest is accumulative. Mr. Smith asks that the Working Group acknowledge that by passing this motion they would be prioritizing harvest over escapement goals. Kevin Whitworth and Nick Smith discuss how escapement goals would be affected. Mr. Whitworth stated that the lower river had had a chance to harvest silver salmon, but they have not had the same opportunity in the upper river and feels the closure affects them the most. Boyd Blihovde (USFWS) voiced his concern that this motion does not include any restrictions.

Motion 3: To extend the meeting by 30 minutes. *Passed (Unanimous)*

- Motion made by Avery Hoffman and seconded by Albert Kawagely.
- *Audio for this update begins at 1:52:05 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Conversation regarding Motion 2 continued after this motion had passed.

Motion 4: To request that Bethel Test Fish and sonar to extend their season to cover the coho salmon run. *Passed (8 yesses, 0 nos)*

- Motion made by Avery Hoffman and seconded by Walter Morgan.
- *Audio for this update begins at 2:13:00 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

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- Barbara Carlson asks if this motion passes if it could be put into action in the future. Sean Larson (ADFG) answered that the department would be unable to enact this motion this year due to employee schedules and budgets. The group moved forward on the motion to make their desires known. Avery Hoffman reasoned that the projects are ending halfway through the coho salmon run and he feels that the extension of the season would be warranted with the fishing closure. Keegan Birchfield, from the sonar project, made a comment that the budget would be up for review in the spring and extending the season has been requested. Mr.

Motion 5: To extend the meeting by 30 minutes. *Passed (Unanimous)*

- Motion made by Mike Williams and seconded by Dan Esai
- *Audio for this update begins at 2:24:30 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*

Motion 6: To provide 3-day opportunities each week in Sections 1-3 with 4-inch mesh, 60 feet long and 45 mesh depth setnets to target whitefish. *Passed (6 yesses, 1 no, and 1 abstention)*

- Motion made by Mike Williams and seconded by Kevin Whitworth
- *Audio for this update begins at 2:25:00 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- There was some conversation to clarify the motion and how this motion would affect motion 2, what capabilities ADFG management had regarding restrictions and management tools and how the run timing for coho is considered complete when the season's projects finish, regardless of the actual coho salmon run. Mr. Williams said that he would like to continue with the motion even though ADFG is unable to follow through. Some thought that the 4-inch mesh size was too small.

Motion 7: For USFWS and ADF&G to upgrade their sonar technology with depth-sounding equipment to better assess what is in the river by boat and avoid using a net. *This motion was not voted on due to loss of quorum, however Keegan Birchfield who works at the sonar site explained that the technology they currently use is the best technology available for this application and that they are constantly seeking out new and better technologies.*

- *Audio for this update begins at 2:42:40 – Meeting Audio – 8/17/22*
- Motion made by Allen Simeon and seconded by
- Allen Simeon would like to address the damage done to fish that are caught in nets and questions the accuracy of the current technology. Mr. Birchfield said that even though there is great technology for personal use the technology does not work as well at the scale or for the application needed. Additionally, the set location allows the department to compare the run to other years.

WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:

MEMBER SEAT:	NAME:
DOWNRIVER ELDER	<i>Absent</i>
UPRIVER ELDER	Allen Simeon
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Walter Morgan
UPRIVER SUBSISTENCE	Barbara Carlson

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HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	Daniel Esai
MEMBER AT LARGE SEAT 1	Albert Kawagley
MEMBER AT LARGE SEAT 2	<i>Absent</i>
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Kevin Whitworth
YK DELTA RAC	<i>Absent</i>
COMMERCIAL FISHING	<i>Absent</i>
SPORT FISHING	<i>Absent</i>
ADF&G	Nick Smith
CHAIR	Barbara Carlson
<u>ADF&G Comm. Fish:</u> Nick Smith, Sean Larson, Chuck Brazil, Keegan Birchfield, Iris Fletcher <u>Sport Fish Division:</u> John Chythlook <u>Subsistence Division:</u> <u>Commissioner's Office:</u> John Linderman	
<u>USFWS:</u> Boyd Blihovde <u>OSM:</u> <u>NVN:</u> Dan Gillikin <u>ONC:</u> <u>AVCP:</u> <u>KRITFC:</u> Avery Hoffman, Jim Simon, Terese Schomogyi, Andrew Magel <u>UAF:</u> <u>WIRAC:</u> Kevin Whitworth <u>YK Delta RAC:</u> John Andrew	
<u>WG Alternates: (not already listed above)</u> James Nicori (KRITFC)	<u>Media:</u> Anna Rose McArthur <u>Other:</u> Karen Gillis (BSFA) Martin Epchook (Kwethluk, Inc.) Senka Guy (Kwethluk, Inc) Kwethluk Inc. Board members

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS:

Alaska Department of Fish and Game (**ADF&G**), Orutsarmiut Native Council (**ONC**), Association of Village Council Presidents (**AVCP**), Georgetown Traditional Council (**GTC**), 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**), ADF&G Subsistence Division (**SD**), 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**), Law Enforcement (**LE**), Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (**KRITFC**),

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