

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

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

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

May 25, 2023

On Thursday, May 25th, 2023, the KRSMWG meeting was called to order at 9:03 a.m. and adjourned at 2:28 p.m. Meeting time was approximately 4 hours and 30 minutes. A quorum was established with 7 full voting members in attendance and one additional member joined into the meeting after the lunch break for a total of 8 voting members. Alissa Rogers chaired the meeting. This meeting was focused on forecasts for the season and front-end closures.

AGENDA ITEMS AND SUMMARY INFORMATION:

A. Bering Sea Juvenile Salmon Report: *Audio for this update begins at 17:08 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

- Sabrina Garcia, ADFG, gives an update on the Southern Bering Sea Salmon Survey. A summary can be found on page 3 of the Informational Packet.
 - The study was modeled after the Northern Bering Sea Salmon Survey conducted in Norton Sound and the Yukon. The Southern Bering Sea Survey will concentrate on the Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay.
 - The goal is to understand what happens to fish from these systems when they are in the ocean. Juvenile salmon studies help forecast future adult abundance.
 - Funding is approved for the next 3 years.
 - The team will be using the survey platform to tag immature Chinook salmon with satellite tags that will stay on for 9 months each, which will tell researchers what salmon habitat is like throughout the year.
- There was a brief conversation with WG members about the North Bering Sea survey results and what has been learned from that project, the forecast for Yukon salmon and how the Southern Bering Sea survey will differ and will need a few years to build the data set before making any comments on the Kuskokwim and Bristol Bay stocks. *Audio for this discussion begins at 24:21 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

B. 2022 Season Recap:

- Sean Larson, ADFG, gives a summary of the 2022 fishing season assessment projects and the results. *Audio for this update begins at 33:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Bethel Test Fish, Page 5 in the Informational Packet (33:55 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23)
 - King and sockeye CPUE were just below 2008-2021 average
 - Chum and coho CPUE were well below average.
 - Sonar, Page 6 in the Informational Packet (34:38 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23)
 - Only 3 years of coho data
 - Estimates from 2022 sonar: 146,000 Chinook; 103,000 chums; 614,000 sockeye; 161,000 coho
 - Estimate is treated as an index.
 - Weirs, Beginning on page 7 in the Informational Packet (36:04 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/22)
 - Chinook escapement was met at Kwethluk and Kogrukuk weirs and exceeded at the George River weir. Salmon River at the Aniak River Weir and Pitka Fork had the low escapement.

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- Chum escapement goal was not met at the Kogrukluik weir.
- Sockeye escapement was met at the Kogrukluik weir and Telaquana River weir saw over 150,000 sockeye salmon.
- Coho salmon escapement at Kwethluk and George River weirs was especially low and did not meet the escapement goals at the Kwethluk River Weir.
- Chinook Age/Sex Composition, beginning on page 11 of the Informational Packet (38:50 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23)
 - On average, smaller male fish are being caught and should be expected due to low mesh size.
 - The Chinook run had a low percentage of 7-year-old fish, and a lower-than-average female fish. This trend began in 2015 and is not unique to Kuskokwim.
 - *There is discussion about this trend that begins at 42:00 – Meeting Audio – 05/25/2023.*
- Kuskokwim River Subsistence Harvest is graphed on Page 14 of the Informational Packet. *Audio for this update begins at 45:00 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Subsistence harvest of all species has declined over time.
- Chinook Salmon Run Reconstruction information can be found on page 15 of the Informational Packet. *Audio for this update begins at 46:18 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Run Reconstruction vs Sonar on page 16 of the Informational Package compares the total run to sonar estimates plus harvest estimates and shows that the numbers are close. *Audio for this update begins at 47:53 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- Chinook Salmon Forecast: 115,000-170,000. *Audio for this update begins at 48:58 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- A summary of 2022 ADFG Assessment projects and results can be found on pages 19 and 19 of the Informational Packet.
- There is discussion regarding the low numbers at the Aniak River weirs, timing of the run and how disproportionate harvest on the early part of the run effects the fish bound for the headwaters, possible sonar bias, and genetics study of Telaquana River sockeye salmon. *Audio for this update begins at 50:40 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Kevin Whitworth expresses concern that even when escapement had been met or exceeded there has been a decrease in harvest and people are not getting the fish they need. The group continues to discuss factors that may be contributing to the low returns, younger and smaller returning fish, and the low number of fish reaching the spawning grounds. Some theories discussed include Ichthyophonous, selective predation by Orcas and Sea Lions. *Audio for this discussion at 56:25 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23*
 - Questions are asked about the current assessment projects, what information is gathered, and how that information can be used. Other assessment projects and potential studies are discussed. The genetic study of Telaquana sockeye

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salmon, conditions in the ocean and smolt out-migration projects are touched on. *Audio for this discussion begins at 1:05:20 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

- Management factors, other fisheries including intercept fisheries and ocean conditions are discussed as contributing to the issue. The same trend is consistent in many regions and management changes over time have seemed to have little effect. Run timing of returning salmon is discussed. The first returning salmon of the run typically are bound for the headwaters. Alissa Rogers expressed concern over the timing of the gillnet openings that had been announced by the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta National Wildlife Refuge and how those openings may affect headwaters escapement and harvest opportunities. *Audio for this discussion at 1:17:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23*

C. 2023 Fishery Management:

- **ADF&G:** *Audio for this update begins at 1:30:25 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Sean Larson summarized the 2023 Kuskokwim River Assessment Projects, which are listed and summarized on pages 19-21 of the Informational Packet.
- **NVN:** *Audio for this update begins at 1:31:05 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Dan Gillikin talks about the projects that NVN will be involved in this year. Aniak Test Fish will begin on June 1 and end July 15th. The Salmon River weir will operate from July 1 to August 15th. Coho salmon are not typically monitored. Mr. Gillikin addressed a concern regarding chum passage accuracy from last year because of failure of the weir due to high water. Counts were still made with a 90% confidence interval.
- **USFWS:** *Audio for this update begins at 1:34:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Aaron Moses stated the weir crew and smolt crew began setting up the first week of May. The weir is already in place and Frank Harris will be coming out in the next couple of weeks. They plan to have it fish tight by June 15th.
- **KRITFC:** *Audio for this update begins at 1:35:25 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Justin Leon speaks about KRITFC projects that will be occurring this summer. Next week a crew will be assessing the Takotna River weir and the following week a crew will be there to fix any damage and install the weir by the week of June 19th. Counts will begin July 1st.
 - Terese Schomogyi said KRITFC will do the Community Based Harvest Monitor Program this year. They have monitors in Eek, Tuntutuliak, Napakiak, Kwethluk, and Tuluksak. They are still recruiting monitors in Napaskiak, Akiachak, and Akiak. Training with ONC was done on May 22. Harvest Monitors will be doing surveys before and after each fishing opener.
- **ONC:** *Audio for this update begins at 1:38:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Alissa Rogers talks about 26 projects that ONC will be involved during the 2023 season. These projects include Bethel Test Fish distribution, ASL program, Otolith program, Aerial Surveys, Fish camp and boat harbor surveys, traditional and local knowledge program whitefish project and among many others. Ms. Rogers added that she is

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working on extending the budget for the in-season fisheries programs to include coho salmon through October.

- Barb Carlson asked for information about ONC's whitefish project. Ms. Rogers said that she will be meeting with Frank Harris, USFWS, later this week. The goal is to assess the decline of whitefish. *Audio for this update begins at 1:42:14 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge:** *Audio for this update begins at 1:44:18 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Boyd Blihovde introduces Laurie Beck as the deputy manager at the refuge and announces his intentions to leave the position of manager. Laurie will be taking over his position in August. The Yukon Delta NWR hired a fisheries biologist, Nate Akers who will be beginning work this summer. The refuge was awarded \$800,000 by DOI and will be looking to spend that money. Some goals include to help extend the ADFG sonar project to assess coho salmon and to add funding to the smolt-migration project in Kwethluk. They will be working on updating the fisheries management plan with KRITFC and creating a step-down plan.
 - The season was kicked off on May 15th with a public hearing, then in-season meetings with KRITFC began. There was concern over bycatch in the Bering Sea and other fisheries, however most people seemed agreeable to the June 1st front-end closure.
 - The announcement that was released regarding the June 1st closure, did not explicitly say the river would be closed to alternate gear for non-federally qualified users so an announcement will be made to address the oversight.
 - Setnet openings have been announced for June 3, 6, and 9th from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. The openings are intended to allow fishing for fish other than Chinook salmon. Drift and setnet openings have been announced for June 12th and June 17th from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. They separated the openers by an extra day this year to allow for more fish passage but felt that they had to have at least one opener a week to avoid public opposition.
 - Kevin Whitworth adds a few points. The federal special action over sections 1-3 of the Kuskokwim River will begin June 1st and go through August 31st and limits fishing to federal qualified subsistence users in the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge. There are tributary closures included in the federal special action, including the Kwethluk and Kisaralik rivers, among others. KRITFC and USFWS wanted to provide at least one opportunity to fish on the weekend. Alternative gear will be allowed throughout the closure and non-salmon tributaries, 100-foot upriver from the confluence with the Kuskokwim. *Audio for this update begins at 1:55:50 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Lamont Albertson names the KRITFC members: Betty Magnuson and Kevin Whitworth in McGrath; Megan Leary, Allen Simeon and Walter Morgan in the middle river, Mike Williams, Henry Hunter, Robert Lekander, Paul Cleveland, and James Nicori. Justin Leon is the KRITFC area biologist. Some concerns that were heard in this spring's meetings were high water and ice and how that affects the fishing dates and closures,

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observations of more people fishing in the non-spawning rivers and off-shore during closures, and the intercept fisheries including Area M. *Audio for this update begins at 2:07:50 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

ADF&G MANAGEMENT ACTIONS UNDER CONSIDERATION: *Audio for this update begins at 2:16:55 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

- Nick Smith presents regulatory changes this year including 3 proposals adopted by the Board of Fisheries regarding the Kuskokwim River and 1 proposal adopted regarding Kuskokwim Bay. Mr. Smith also summarizes what the state can and cannot do while a Federal Special Action is in place due to current litigation. There is some confusion over what the lawsuit and injunction regarding what ADF&G and the Working Group are not allowed to do and what they are required to do, which is covered in this section of audio and is further explained at 2:44:20 in the audio.
- Mr. Smith suggests front-end subsistence closures begin on June 1st in sections 1-3 in accordance with the Federal Special Action and in compliance with the injunction, and June 7th in Sections 4-5. Mr. Smith suggests immediately opening Sections 4 & 5 to setnets oriented to the bank with 6 inch or less mesh until further notice and to allow alternative gear use with the release of Chinook and chum salmon.
- *Audio for Working Group discussion regarding the suggestions made by ADF&G begin at 2:37:10*
 - **Date to begin early season closure – June 7th in Sections 4&5**
 - **Set gillnet fishing periods during early season closure.**
 - **Selective gears were not discussed.**
 - **Sport Fishing (John Chythlook, ADF&G)**
 - **Closed by Emergency Order to Chinook and chum for entire season.**

D. WORKING GROUP BUSINESS:

- **Election of Co-Chairs – to remain the same with the exception of Mary Peltola, who has resigned from the Working Group (Alissa Rogers, Lamont Albertson, Barbara Carlson, and Fritz Charles.)**
 - **See Motion 6**
- **Working Group In-Season Meeting Schedule –Wednesdays 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. beginning June 7**
 - **See Motion 8**
- **Nominate WG representative to serve at KRITFC inseason meetings – Allen Simeon**
 - **See Motion 7**

E. COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:

- **Upriver Elder:** Allen Simeon
 - Allen Simeon comments that most of the salmon catch happens in the lower river and does not want any closures upriver because the impact is so low. Mr. Simeon adds that management decisions should consider the weather. *Audio for this update begins at 3:07:00 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

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- Allen Simeon made comments regarding his concern over sport fishing remaining open during subsistence closures. He feels catch and release endangers the salmon, because of the damage from the hook. Mr. Simeon also expresses his concern regarding a perceived increase of pike in the river and tributaries. He encourages others to harvest pike and asks managers to consider allowing nets in the tributaries to catch pike. *Audio for this update begins at 3:48:59 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **Lower River Subsistence:** Mike Williams
 - Mike Williams expresses his frustration at the lack of harvest in 2022 and the complete closure of coho salmon last year. He is supportive of the current suggestions for sections 4 and 5 in hopes that more fish will make it upriver. *Audio for this update begins at 3:29:00 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Mike Williams thanks everyone for their work and adds that he has caught 10 broad whitefish and 18 sheefish this season so far. *Audio for this update begins at 3:54:30 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **1st Member At Large:** Albert Kawagley
 - Albert Kawagley makes a comment about Area M and believes that if fishing time were reduced there that more fish would make it to the Kuskokwim. He expressed concern for hungry families up and down the river. *Audio for this update begins at 2:15:35 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Mr. Kawagley is looking forward to setting up the smokehouse and drying rack and is hopeful for a good harvest. He thanks the other members and the villages for meeting. *Audio for this update begins at 3:56:05 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **Sport Fishing:** Lamont Albertson
 - Mr. Albertson hopes that something will be done about guiding on the Aniak River. He feels that sportfishing and guiding is harmful to the salmon population and therefore harmful to the people of the Kuskokwim. *Audio for this update begins at 3:56:35 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **KRITFC:** James Nicori
 - James Nicori also is concerned about rod and reel fishing and has heard that people fish in the tributaries when subsistence is closed with rod and reel. He is also concerned with pike in the river. Mr. Nicori comments on the conflict over management control and hopes that people can work together. He concludes his comments by thanking everyone and wishing them a good Memorial Day weekend. *Audio for this update begins at 3:58:00 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **Upriver Subsistence:** Barbara Carlson
 - Ms. Carlson hopes everyone is able to get fresh fish sometime soon and thanks everyone. *Audio for this update begins at 4:02:55 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **Western Interior RAC:** Kevin Whitworth
 - Mr. Whitworth expresses appreciation for the group and for supporting the co-chairs. He acknowledges that there will be tension due to the shortage of fish but hopes we can

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all work together. Mr. Whitworth mentions other fisheries that may have an impact and measures taken to work with them. He thanks everyone and wishes everyone a happy Memorial Day. *Audio for this update begins at 4:03:30 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

- **YK Delta RAC:** Alissa Rogers
 - Alissa Rogers spoke out against openings that have been announced for the lower river and feels they run contrary to the goal of getting fish to the headwaters. *Audio for this update begins at 3:36:50 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Ms. Rogers thanks everyone for attending the Working Group meetings. She says her goal at meetings is to ensure everyone's voice is heard and work through issues with managers. She concludes her comments by thanking everyone and acknowledging that the group must attempt to be fair and cannot "be everyone's friend." *Audio for this update begins at 4:07:30 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- **ADFG:** Nick Smith and Dave Runfola
 - Nick Smith states that he is happy to be back and hopes meetings will be constructive going forward. *Audio for this update begins at 4:06:20 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
 - Dave Runfola thanks the Working Group for continuing to meet and looks forward to working with everyone. *Audio for this update begins at 4:06:55 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:

- Nia Long, ONC, asks questions about the conflict and tension regarding the ADF&G management recommendations. Lamont Albertson attempts to address the question explaining the conflict between the state and the tribes along the Kuskokwim and the desire to have one cohesive group to manage the entire river. *Audio for this update begins at 2:53:30 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- Briana Henry, ONC, asked questions about the overall management goals for the different sections of the river are. Nick Smith explained how the river is split into sections and the overall goals of escapement and getting fish to the spawning grounds. There is some discussion about how allowing fish passage in the lower river is the most effective strategy to get fish to the spawning grounds and ensure subsistence harvest. *Audio for this update begins at 3:00:05 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- Briana Henry makes a comment that Yupik traditional values dictate that people respect the land and animals. She feels that hooking a fish and allowing it to bleed out in the river and die is not respectful. *Audio for this update begins at 3:20:53 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

The meeting was adjourned at 2:28 p.m.

WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:

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

- *Motion made by Mike Williams, 2nd by Lamont Albertson; Audio for this request begins at 14:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

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- The amendment was a request by Lamont Albertson for the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge under agenda item C, to be moved immediately after the 2023 Assessment projects reports.

Motion 2: To begin discussion regarding ADFG recommendations shown on Page 29 of the Working Group Informational Packet. *Died (No 2nd)*

- *Motion made by Barbara Carlson, no 2nd; Audio for this motion begins at 2:43:05 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- There was speculation that the inclusion of Sections 1-3 in the recommended actions may be the reason why no one would 2nd the motion.

Motion 3: To begin discussion about when the frontend closure in sections 4 and 5 should begin. *Died (No 2nd)*

- *Motion made by Barbara Carlson, no 2nd; Audio for this motion begins at 2:37:10 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*
- There is a brief discussion about the hesitancy of the group to discuss management actions with ADF&G; *Audio for this motion begins at 2:45:40 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

Motion 4: To suspend Working Group bylaws to include public in discussion. *Passed (Unanimous)*

- *Motion made by Lamont Albertson, 2nd by Allen Simeon; Audio for this update begins at 3:20:13 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

Motion 5: To support ADFG recommendation to begin front-end closure on June 7th in sections 4 and 5, and immediately open sections 4 and 5 to bank oriented set gill nets. *Passed (7 yesses, 1 no)*

- *Motion made by Mike Williams, 2nd by Barbara Carlson; Audio for this update begins at 3:32:50 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

Motion 6: Co-chairs to remain the same with the exception of Mary Peltola, who has resigned from the Working Group. *Passed (Unanimous)*

- *Motion made by Mike Williams, 2nd by Albert Kawagley; Audio for this update begins at 3:39:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

Motion 7: For Lamont Albertson to continue as the WG representative to serve at KRITFC inseason meetings.

- *Motion made by Mike Williams, 2nd by Kevin Whitworth; Audio for this update begins at 3:43:30 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

Motion 8: To hold Working Group Meetings on Wednesdays, beginning on June 7th. *Passed (Unanimous)*

- *Motion made by Lamont Albertson, 2nd by Albert Kawagley; Audio for this update begins at 3:39:15 – Meeting Audio – 5/25/23.*

Motion 9: To adjourn at 2:28 PM. *Passed (Unanimous)*

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WORKING GROUP ATTENDANCE:

MEMBER SEAT:	NAME:
DOWNRIVER ELDER	<i>Absent</i>
UPRIVER ELDER	Allen Simeon
LOWER RIVER SUBSISTENCE	Mike Williams Sr.
MIDDLE RIVER SUBSISTENCE	<i>Absent</i>
UPRIVER SUBSISTENCE	Barbara Carlson
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	<i>Absent</i>
MEMBER AT LARGE SEAT 1	Albert Kawagley
MEMBER AT LARGE SEAT 2	<i>Absent</i>
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Kevin Whitworth
YK DELTA RAC	Alissa N. Rogers
COMMERCIAL FISHING	<i>Absent</i>
SPORT FISHING	LaMont Albertson
ADF&G	Nick Smith
CHAIR	Alissa N. Rogers
<u>ADF&G Comm. Fish:</u> Nick Smith, Sean Larson, Chuck Brazil, Bobette Dickerson, Sabrina Garcia, Zach Liller, Dave Runfola <u>Sport Fish Division:</u> John Chythlook, Klaus Wuttig <u>Subsistence Division:</u> Katie Hayden <u>Commissioner's Office:</u> John Linderman	
<u>USFWS:</u> Boyd Blihovde, Aaron Moses, Christian Alexie Jr., Emmit Nicori, Chris Tulik, Laurie Beck <u>OSM:</u> Brooke McDavid, Nissa Pilcher <u>NVN:</u> Dan Gillikin <u>ONC:</u> Delen Hooper, Eleanor Whitney, Nia Long, Briana Henry, Alissa N. Rogers <u>AVCP:</u> Jennifer Hooper, Ashley Johnson <u>KRITFC:</u> Jim Simon, Terese Schomogyi, Lamont Albertson, Kevin Whitworth, Justin Leon, Joe Spaeder <u>UAF:</u> <u>WIRAC:</u> Kevin Whitworth <u>YK Delta RAC:</u>	
<u>WG Alternates:</u> (not already listed above)	<u>Other:</u> Florin Kargi, CVRF; Doug Molyneux

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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