

# Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

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

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

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023

On Wednesday, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the KRSMWG meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. and adjourned at 1:40 p.m. Meeting time was approximately 3 hours and 40 minutes. A quorum was established with 11 full voting members in attendance. Alissa Rogers chaired the meeting. Primary themes included boat traffic in spawning tributaries, the flooding in Crooked Creek, and impact of middle river communities on the salmon run.

## **AGENDA ITEMS AND SUMMARY INFORMATION:**

### **A. USFWS/KRITFC UPDATE: *Audio for this update begins at 24:35 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23***

- Boyd Blihovde gave an update on activities of YK Delta National Wildlife Refuge staff.
- Aerial net and boat counts were done once for each setnet opener between Tuntuntuliak and Tuluksak. On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, approximately 62 nets were counted. On June 6<sup>th</sup> 96 nets were counted. Most nets were located between Napakiak and Akiachak; 37 were counted there on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 52 on the 6<sup>th</sup>.
- Official counts from harvest surveys are not yet complete. Some people caught only 1 Chinook and others caught up to 25-30.
- KRITFC and USFWS will meet this afternoon, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to work on drafting a management plan and have been taking into consideration comments they have heard.
- Kevin Whitworth added that the frontend closure is meant to conserve fish and that is the reason why there has only been setnet openings at this time. Mr. Whitworth also explained that decisions about the timing of openings were made with consideration for feedback that they have heard from users. Driftnet opener dates were also adjusted due to lack of fish in the headwaters. *Audio for this update begins at 30:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*
  - Charlie Brown made a comment that when speaking to others he has heard that downriver people prefer to driftnet because the river is wider. Setnets are better upriver where the river is narrower. *Audio for this comment begins at 35:35 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*
  - Charlie Brown's comment led to a conversation about why it is difficult to setnet in many areas of the river. Downriver, the river is too wide. Upriver the river is too swift. The middle river has very few eddies to set a net in.
  - Michael Zaukar, Chauthbaluk concurs with others upriver that setnetting is difficult and asks about openings upriver and gives an update on his catch so far. *Audio for this update begins at 55:45 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*
  - Alissa Rogers asks why there was 3 back-to-back setnet openers, knowing that setnets are only good in the area where people are already able to fish the easiest. *Audio for this discussion begins at 47:50 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*
    - Boyd Blihovde and Jim reiterated that the Kuskokwim is within the frontend closure period and the openers are meant to catch other fish species and allow some fishing and is consistent with the state's frontend closure policies, but Chinook should not be targeted. *Audio for this update begins at 53:00 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*

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## **B. ADF&G MANAGEMENT ACTIONS UNDER CONSIDERATION:** *Audio for this update begins at 57:55 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

- Nick Smith begins by summarizing the current management actions in place in Sections 4 and 5, upriver of Aniak and opening the river to subsistence fishing in those sections to set or drift nets beginning June 12<sup>th</sup> and until further notice. Mr. Smith justifies his recommendation by reasoning that annual King salmon harvest in sections 4 and 5 is low enough that last year in the lower river more fish were caught in one opener than the total harvest in Sections 4 and 5 for that year.
  - Following the recommendation, Megan Leary (representing herself only) recognized that people downriver may question the upriver opener and feel that it is unfair. She doesn't think people will understand. Ms. Leary suggested a visual comparison of CPUE, population, and harvest among other metrics that may be helpful in explaining to the public the differences and why opening the river upriver of Aniak is a sound decision. *Audio for this update begins at 1:04:10 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
    - Others from the middle and upriver concurred and told their own stories and insight of how much effort they put in for so few fish.

## **C. PEOPLE TO BE HEARD:**

- Julia Zaukar from Crooked Creek comments about how far the fish have traveled and how much the fish have left to go to get to their spawning grounds by the time they reach Crooked Creek. She said that she feels bad for their struggle and knowing that the fish numbers are low. Ms. Zaukar said that when she hears people talk about small catches in the lower river they seem like big catches to the people in her area. She also asked that people keep in mind that Crooked Creek is dealing with flooding at this time and some people have lost everything. They are trying to rebuild. *Audio for this update begins at 1:09:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Elena Phillips adds that a lot of families also lost their staple foods and all their basic necessities. *Audio for this update begins at 1:13:50 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- Adolph Lupie from Tuntutuliak summarized what he had heard from others about setnetting up and down the river and promises to bring it up at the Annual KRITFC meeting in the spring next year. Mr. Lupie said that the water is high and ideal for fish swimming up the river, so he hopes that people in Crooked Creek and other places that are struggling, get fish soon. He hopes that the combination of traditional and scientific knowledge will help solve these problems. *Audio for this update begins at 1:17:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Mr. Lupie's comments regarding the fish swimming upriver, leads to a short discussion about run timing.
- Elena Phillips comments that she does not understand the biological reasons for closing the river, because they also fish for other non-salmon species. She recalls a time when salmon was closed that her and her husband caught many whitefish and that helped to get through the winter. Ms. Phillips adds that gas prices are very high in the middle and upriver villages and the eddies to setnet in are 6 miles away. *Audio for this update begins at 1:26:35 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

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- Julie Zaukar adds that the salmon have not arrived yet and are not near the headwaters. Crooked Creek is struggling with food security and need to be able to driftnet fish so that they can feed their families.
- Mike Gore, from Bethel asks if it is possible to close the choke point at Napaskiak because many fish are caught there, and it is hard for fish to get through to head upriver. *Audio for this update begins at 1:30:30 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Boyd Blihovde, USFWS, answers that the choke point and overcrowding in that area is an issue that KRITFC and USFWS are trying to solve. Mr. Blihovde said that one of his concerns is when people leave their area to fish a more productive area, leading to overcrowding. Mr. Gore said that if he is not successful in the Bethel area, he will head upriver to state waters to fish. *Audio for this update begins at 1:31:45 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

## D. CONTINUING BUSINESS:

- Subsistence Reports: Lower River, Middle River, Upper River, ONC In-season Subsistence Report
  - Lower River
    - Charlie Brown, Eek, gives a subsistence report in Yupik which Mr. Tulik translates for the group. Mr. Brown said that he and his family have not gone fishing yet this season. Last year he lost his smokehouse due to high water. He and his family will replace it before fishing. He has heard that some herring are being caught on the coast. Mr. Brown said that he has not heard of many people fishing yet. He added that he is not as active as he used to be. *Audio for this update begins at 1:36:15 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
    - Fritz Charles is in Tuntutuliak with family. Mr. Charles said that his family tried to setnet during the June 6<sup>th</sup> setnet opener and caught 1 King salmon. He said that the debris in the river made it not worth it as they spent an hour and half clearing the net of debris. Mr. Charles only saw one other setnet out. Mr. Charles reiterated what Megan Leary had said earlier about a visual that explains the difference in harvest between the middle and upriver and downriver why they are allowed to be open after only 5 days closed, but lower river is closed for weeks, and the general public does not understand. He continues to say that the upriver and downriver battles is not how we were raised, and we need to help each other. He reminds everyone that this meeting is primarily for upriver, since we are under federal control in the lower river. *Audio for this update begins at 1:41:10 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
    - The chair asks Adolph Lupie, Tuntutuliak, for a subsistence report. Mr. Lupie said that he had not seen any fish on the fish racks, but people are looking forward to the openers next week. *Audio for this update begins at 1:49:55 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
    - Albert Kawagley, Bethel, said he has not yet been out. He would like to get out for pike and whitefish in case the salmon do poorly. Mr. Kawagley said that

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Bethel is a large city, and many boats go out when there are openers, but he feels bad for upriver people and said that we have got to help each other so they can get a few fish too. *Audio for this update begins at 2:14:10 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

- James Nicori, Kwethluk, gave a report of his catch from before the Frontend closure and from the June 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> setnet openers. He caught 1 King salmon before the closure, 8 King salmon on June 3<sup>rd</sup> which he donated to others, and 7 King salmon on June 6<sup>th</sup>. He saw a few other setnets during the setnet openings. He said that it is the 1<sup>st</sup> time he caught 8 fish on the first opener, he usually only catches one. Mr. Nicori reasoned that with the high water salmon will be able to travel faster upriver since they do not have to swim around the sandbars. *Audio for this request begins at 2:17:45 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*
- **ONC In-season Report**
  - *Audio for this update begins at 1:53:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Alissa Rogers begins by giving a brief description of the ONC Subsistence Harvest Monitor Program and stated that it has ran from May 26<sup>th</sup> to June 6<sup>th</sup> this year. There were several new employees this year which Ms. Rogers acknowledges. She gives a brief description of the program, which surveys fish camps between Napaskiak slough and the “Y” of Akiachak and Kwethluk and completes boat harbor surveys. ONC serves as the largest reporter to the Working Group. ONC collaborates their data with KRITFC’s harvest monitor program to calculate CPUE.
  - Delen Hooper gives a report on the results of the surveys and discusses some of the comments the crew heard during surveys. There was an average of less than 1 Chinook salmon harvested for both the June 3<sup>rd</sup> and June 6<sup>th</sup> setnet opportunities. Some of the comments included the excitement for the opportunity to fish and the hope that there will be more openings this year. Others spoke about the damage sustained at fish camps from the Merbok storm and break up. Many people commented about the high water and the debris in the river. *Audio for this update begins at 1:58:45 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Ms. Hooper also reported on ONC’s Chinook ASL project. ONC is offering incentives for members of the public to complete and return these kits. Participants will receive \$5 per returned kit and if a person returns 20 or more kits their name will be submitted to a lottery for \$50. Fifty-two kits have been distributed to the public. Historically 97% of kits have been returned, so they anticipate receiving 30-50 of those kits back completed. They have 140 kits left. *Audio for this update begins at 1:53:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Nia Long gives a brief update on ADFG Bethel Test Fish (BTF) and ONC’s fish distribution program. BTF caught 19 fish over 33 drifts. 39 % were Chinook, 16 % were chum and 47% were other fish (sheefish or burbot.) The smelt run began

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on May 30<sup>th</sup> and there has been an increase of sheefish harvested between June 4-6. They hope the increase in Sheefish indicates a later start to the sheefish and King salmon runs. 18 of the 19 fish harvested by BTF have been distributed to community members. ONC will continue to distribute BTF harvests through June. *Audio for this update begins at 2:05:05 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

- Alissa Rogers outlines the Fish distribution program from BTF, including how priority is ranked and airlines and partners that ONC works with. Ms. Rogers listed different projects that the ONC fisheries crew is intending to assist with including ADFG weirs and sonar, USFWS Kwethluk weir, USFWS Broad whitefish mark and recapture project in McGrath, and other salmon fishery projects. *Audio for this update begins at 2:07:05 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- Middle River
  - Walter Morgan, Lower Kalskag, said that he caught 3 sheefish. He only saw one other net. Mr. Morgan said that the water is dropping and he believes the snow has melted already and added that fishing has been slow in his area and it has not yet been worth the gas. *Audio for this update begins at 2:23:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
    - Mr. Morgan requests that the catch from False Pass is included in the next meeting agenda. Nick Smith agreed to include it in the future in-season meeting packets and told the group that they had only begun fishing the day before so numbers were not yet available.
  - Lamont Albertson, Aniak, reported that there are the same concerns around Aniak of the high water and debris, which makes setnetting hard. Hook and line fishing has been good for pike and some sheefish have been reported. *Audio for this update begins at 2:26:55 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Ruby Egrass, Red Devil, said that she did not have a report since she is not in Red Devil. *Audio for this update begins at 2:28:05 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Allen Simeon, Aniak, expressed his appreciation for what Julia Zuakar had done in Crooked Creek with the setnet and releasing King Salmon. Mr. Simeon also expressed his appreciation to Nick Smith and the department for opening the river to subsistence above Aniak. Mr. Simeon feels that it is the appropriate timing. He said it would be helpful for the people upriver and he agrees that there will be very little impact on the run. Mr. Simeon asked how deep the nets are that are used at Aniak Test Fish. He reported that during the opener on June 3<sup>rd</sup> he caught 6 sheefish, two of which were over 40 pounds, that were donated to people in Aniak. During the June 6<sup>th</sup> setnet opener he set a net in front of his
  - fish camp but did not have much luck. *Audio for this update begins at 2:28:45 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- NVN Report

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- Megan Leary, NVN, reported that they have not tried fishing yet this season. There is flooding at camp and hope they can get things fixed by the end of the week. *Audio for this update begins at 2:34:45 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- Dan Gilikin answers Mr. Simeon’s question regarding the depth of net they use at Aniak Test Fish. They use a 6-inch mesh, 25 fathom long and 45 mesh depth net. The goal is stay consistent to create an index of abundance and ratio of the composition of fish species that can be compared over years. To accomplish this the process must be standardized. The Salmon River weir is installed, and crews are headed up to do repairs. They plan on being fish tight on July 1<sup>st</sup>.
- Upriver and Headwaters
  - Kevin Whitworh, McGrath, reported that there was not much pressure in McGrath. He has been using a 4-inch setnet and has caught some whitefish. He has only seen one other net out. *Audio for this update begins at 2:38:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- KRITFC In-season Report
  - *Audio for this update begins at 2:41:30 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Terese Schomoygi gave a brief report regarding in-season harvest reports. The June 3<sup>rd</sup> opener 60 setnets were observed and an estimated 376 Chinook salmon were harvested. Preliminary numbers for the June 6<sup>th</sup> opener are 82 setnets, 220 Chinook and 1 chum harvested. To receive emails from KRITFC with these estimates call (907)545-7388.
- Overview of the Kuskokwim River salmon run assessment.
  - *Audio for this update begins at 2:45:00 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Sean Larson gave a brief update on the salmon run assessment projects led by ADF&G.
    - Bethel Test Fish has 1 week worth of data. Six Chinook had been caught which gave a CPUE of 8, which is the same for this date in the previous year. A couple chum salmon had been caught as well with a CPUE of 5, which is earlier than chum salmon were seen in the previous year. No other salmon species have been caught.
    - The Sonar crew is at the camp and working on getting everything setup. They will be operational beginning the weekend of June 10<sup>th</sup>.
    - Weir crews will be headed upriver to begin set up the weekend of June 10<sup>th</sup>.
  - Alissa Rogers asked about the parasite project that the research team will be working on. Sean answered that they would be sampling 30-60 fish from BTF for parasites and ichthyophonous. *Audio for this update begins at 2:47:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Subsistence Division Report
  - Katie Hayden gave a brief report on ADFG subsistence projects. There are two projects happening on the Kuskokwim that the division hopes to wrap up this year. One will address local and traditional knowledge of salmon harvest and use in the lower Kuskokwim River focusing on historical knowledge in the area and how fishing has

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changed due to salmon conservation. In June, a crew will head to Nunapitchuk and Kasigluk to observe how people fish for salmon and preserve them. The other project began in 2020 to answer a Board of Fisheries request and funded by AKSS to learn how people fish the non-spawning tributaries and how fish have moved over the years. *Audio for this update begins at 2:49:40 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

- Working Group KRITFC Representative Report
  - *Audio for this update begins at 2:54:30 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - Lamont Albertson reported that KRITFC would meet that night, June 7<sup>th</sup> between 3 and 5 p.m. to discuss the river conditions. Mr. Albertson reported that he has heard requests that ADF&G pay attention to guiding on the Aniak River.
- Sport Fish: *Audio for this update begins at 2:55:55 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
  - The water is high and dirty so there has been no sport fishing.

**E. OLD BUSINESS:**

- No Old business was addressed at this meeting.

**F. NEW BUSINESS:**

- Recruitment for vacant positions was moved to Old Business to be addressed at the next meeting. *Audio for this update begins at 3:36:20 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*

**G. COMMENTS FROM WORKING GROUP MEMBERS:**

- Alissa Rogers made a request that outside agendas not hold up Working Group business and to address those issues in the appropriate meetings. *Audio for this request begins at 1:10 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*

**The meeting was adjourned at approximately 1:40 p.m.**

**WORKING GROUP MOTIONS:**

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

- *Audio for this request begins at 1:10 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/23*
- Albert Kawagley made the motion, 2<sup>nd</sup> by James Nicori

**Motion 2: To extend the meeting. Passed (Unanimous)**

- *Audio for this update begins at 2:13:00 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- Albert Kawagley, 2<sup>nd</sup> by James Nicori

**Motion 3: To support ADF&G recommendations for Sections 4 & 5. Passed (7-0)**

- *Audio for this update begins at 3:05:00 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22*
- Motion made by James Nicori, 2<sup>nd</sup> by Lamont Albertson
- No one spoke against the recommendation to open the river upriver of Aniak. There was some who felt sections 4 and 5 should open immediately, but no motion to amend the recommendation. There was some discussion about opening the river from the Kalskag Bluffs. Boyd Blihovde said they would be discussing the issue later that afternoon during the meeting with KRITFC and USFWS.

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**Motion 4:** For the Working Group to support ADF&G research on the impact of boat traffic on the rearing and spawning of salmon in spawning tributaries of the Kuskokwim River. *Passed (7-0)*

- Audio for this update begins at 3:20:30 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22
- Motion made by James Nicori, 2<sup>nd</sup> by Allen Simeon
- There was discussion about proposals submitted in the past to the Board of Fisheries regarding high powered boats in tributaries of the Kuskokwim. Mr. Nicori felt they may be more successful if they work together instead of focusing on one tributary. Mr. Albertson felt the motion was too broad and that the Department of Fish and Game would be more likely to do a study that was specific in nature. Mr. Gilikin reminds the group why proposals have not been adopted in the past by the Board of Fisheries and councils the group to support research before of writing a proposal.

**Motion 3: Adjourn at 1:40 p.m.** *Passed (Unanimous)*

- Audio for this update begins at 3:37:10 – Meeting Audio – 6/7/22
- Motion made by James Nicori, 2<sup>nd</sup> by Lamont Albertson

**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	Ruby Egrass
HEADWATERS SUBSISTENCE	Daniel Esai
MEMBER AT LARGE SEAT 1	Fritz Charles
MEMBER AT LARGE SEAT 2	<i>No current member</i>
WESTERN INTERIOR RAC	Kevin Whitworth
YK DELTA RAC	Alissa Rogers, Adolph Lupie
COMMERCIAL FISHING	Charlie Brown
SPORT FISHING	LaMont Albertson
ADF&G	Nick Smith
CHAIR	Alissa Rogers
<u>ADF&amp;G Comm. Fish:</u> Nick Smith, Dave Runfola, Sean Larson, <u>Sport Fish Division:</u> John Chythlook, Klaus Wuttig <u>Subsistence Division:</u> Katie Hayden, Tim Bembenic <u>Commissioner’s Office:</u>	
<u>USFWS:</u> Boyd Blihovde, Jaden Andrew, Christian Alexie Jr., Emmit Nicori, Chris Tulik, Laurie Beck <u>OSM:</u> Nissa Pilcher, Kevin Foley <u>NVN:</u> Dan Gillikin, Megan Leary <u>ONC:</u> Alissa Rogers, Nia Long, Ore Reich, Reece Swope-Tony, Delen Hooper, Briana Henry, Jenna Charlie <u>AVCP:</u> Jennifer Hooper <u>KRITFC:</u> Jim Simon, Terese Schomogyi, Avery Hoffman, Joe Spader, Kevin Whitworth, Adolph Lupie <u>UAF:</u> <u>WIRAC:</u> Kevin Whitworth	

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<u>YK Delta RAC:</u> Alissa Rogers	
<u>WG Alternates:</u> (not already listed above) Albert Kawagley (1 <sup>st</sup> Member at Large)	<u>Media:</u>
<u>Others:</u> Julia Zuakar, Crooked Creek Traditional Council	

## **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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