

## **PROPOSAL 32**

### **5 AAC 24.361. Copper River King Salmon Management Plan.**

Prohibit commercial salmon fishing in the Copper River District, during the month of May, if the preseason forecast for Copper River king salmon is below the 20-year average, or 35,000 king salmon, as follows:

If the preseason run forecast is below the 20-year average (or 35,000 Kings if a firm number is preferred), no commercial salmon fishing will occur in May (through start of Week 24). Commercial fishing may not open until Week 25 (first week of June).

**What is the issue you would like the board to address and why?** Conservation of King Salmon when projected run is below 20-year average.

King Salmon, particularly the most vulnerable upper river stocks, are heavily exploited in May, often before a single fish is counted in river. Historically the May fishery opens during statistical week 20. In 2017, that falls on May 14. A large number of Kings will be caught that week despite the expected closure inside the barrier islands.

By the time the Board reviews this proposal it will have 2017 harvest and escapement numbers. Those numbers will almost certainly show that more than 3,500 Kings were harvested in May (exceeding the maximum preseason commercial harvest only three weeks into the season). No Kings will have been harvested in the sport or p/u fishery, despite those fisheries being "equal" on the allocation scale with the commercial fishery. The escapement goal will very likely not have been met three of the past five years, plunging the Copper River King into stock of concern status.

This is all very predictable and inevitable based on current commercial management philosophy which is to fish at least twice a week in May, no matter what, to ensure valuable sockeye do not escape. In 2016, we learned that inside closures are not enough to protect a weak King run. The commercial fleet in Cordova harvested 13,075 Kings, killed 83 Kings in educational fisheries, and likely harvested hundreds more Kings with subsistence gillnets between openers.

Upriver sport and P/U users were subject to total closures, and upriver subsistence fishers had to release Kings caught in closely attended wheels.

If the 2017 season is business as usual in Cordova, the board will have to take strong action to protect this new stock of concern because local managers have proven incapable of doing so. In 2016, knowing Kings were in trouble, the commercial fish managers approved 24 and 48 hour openers in the middle of May, harvesting more Kings in the first two weeks of 2016 than they predict harvesting in all of 2017. May restrictions will have the most positive effect on conserving Kings while not unnecessarily restricting Sockeye harvest in June and July when Sockeye are most abundant.

If the preseason forecast is below the 20-year average, there is no biological justification for the inevitable incidental harvest of thousands of Kings in May.

**PROPOSED BY:** Fairbanks Fish and Game Advisory Committee

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