

PROPOSAL 34

5 AAC 24.310. Fishing seasons.

Prohibit commercial salmon fishing in the Copper River District until a salmon is recorded at the Copper River sonar, as follows:

Amend 5 AAC 24.310(a) to add " ... the first commercial salmon opening of any year may only be announced after the department has verified by sonar that a single salmon has escaped into the river."

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why?

Kings in the Copper River have been the subject of numerous upriver harvest restrictions in recent years. Escapement goals (even lowered goals) have not been consistently met. Genetic studies have identified three runs of kings. The upper river stocks enter the mouth in May, and these stocks have been subject to the most restrictions including complete restrictions on harvest in the Gulkana River, and significantly restricted harvests in the Chitina fishery. Although the commercial fleet has recently been fishing outside the barrier islands more than regulations require, they are still harvesting thousands of kings from this imperiled upriver stock. In 2016, the department opened the first three fishing periods for 12, 24, and then 48 hours, eventually killing more Kings (13,075) than the escapement (12,831). When runs were healthy, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game always announced the first mid-May opener several days or weeks in advance, historically declaring a 12-hour opening inside the barrier islands. While advance notice is helpful for the fishers and processors to plan, it can be devastating to the early kings, especially when there is a late spring and the Copper River is full of ice and low water, preventing the kings from entering the river and causing them to mill longer in the mouth, where they are easily harvested by getting rolled up in loose hanging mesh dragging along the bottom of the river channels, or outside the islands in the same loosely hung mesh. If the sonar is not deployed by May 17 it is because the river is full of ice and the fish are not there anyway.

With the decimated king runs in the upper Copper River, especially the Gulkana, it is biologically indefensible to allow such a high rate of exploitation on these early returning fish by having commercial opener(s) before even a single fish has been counted inriver.

PROPOSED BY: Fairbanks Fish and Game Advisory Committee (HQ-F17-047)
