

PROPOSAL 280

5 AAC 01.270. Lawful gear and gear specifications and operation; and 5 AAC 07.365 Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Plan.

Allow use of set gillnets with 6” mesh to harvest salmon other than king salmon and other non-salmon fish species on the Kuskokwim River for subsistence purposes during times of king salmon conservation, as follows:

5 AAC 01.270 (n)(1)(B). Lawful gear and gear specifications and operation.

(n) Notwithstanding (b) and (j) of this section, during times when the commissioner determines that it is necessary for the conservation of king salmon, the commissioner, by emergency order, may close the fishing season in any portion of the Kuskokwim Area and immediately reopen the season in that portion during which one or more of the following gear limitations may be implemented:

(1) for gillnets;

(B) a gillnet mesh size may not exceed six [FOUR] inches and the gillnet may only be operated as a set gillnet; [NO PART OF A SET GILLNET MAY BE MORE THAN 100 FEET FROM THE ORDINARY HIGH WATER MARK;]

5 AAC 07.365 (c)(2)(C) and (c)(3)(C)). Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Plan.

(c) In the king salmon fishery,

(2) when the projected escapement of king salmon is within the drainagewide escapement goal range, the commissioner shall open and close fishing periods, by emergency order, as follows:

(C) notwithstanding (c)(2)(A) of this section, before June 12 the commissioner shall open, by emergency order, at least one subsistence fishing period per week with six-inch [FOUR-INCH] or smaller mesh gillnets; the gillnet may only be operated as a set gillnet [AND NO PART OF THE SET GILLNET MAY BE MORE THAN 100 FEET FROM THE ORDINARY HIGH WATER MARK];

(3) when the projected escapement of king salmon exceeds the drainagewide escapement goal range,

(C) notwithstanding (c)(3)(A) of this section, before June 12 the commissioner shall open, by emergency order, at least one subsistence fishing period per week with six-inch [FOUR-INCH] or smaller mesh gillnets; the gillnet may only be operated as a set gillnet [AND NO PART OF THE SET GILLNET MAY BE MORE THAN 100 FEET FROM THE ORDINARY HIGH WATER MARK];

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? Since 2010, the Kuskokwim River has experienced poor king salmon runs. Total run estimates for Kuskokwim River king salmon in 2012, 2013, and 2014 are the 3 lowest on record. From 2010 through 2013 most tributary escapement goals were not achieved and the Kuskokwim River drainagewide sustainable escapement goal established in 2013 was not achieved that year. Beginning in 2014, a very conservative management approach has been employed on the Kuskokwim River, which has led to most tributary escapement goals being achieved. In addition, drainagewide escapement levels have been near the upper end of the established escapement goal of 65,000–120,000 king salmon since 2015. The preliminary 2019 king salmon return was average, the total run was approximately 230,000, the spawning escapement was estimated to be 180,000, the drainagewide sustainable

escapement goal was exceeded, and all tributary goals were met or exceeded. Communications from Kuskokwim River residents indicate most subsistence needs for king salmon were met.

Up to 4-inch mesh gillnets not exceeding 60 ft in length have been allowed during times of king salmon conservation by emergency order as an opportunity for subsistence fishermen to harvest species of fish other than salmon (e.g., sheefish, whitefish, burbot, and northern pike). It was observed that subsistence fishermen were setting 4-inch mesh gillnets and targeting king salmon with this gear. This was a direct conflict with the intent of this fishing opportunity. In response, the board addressed this issue at their March 2015 meeting and adopted regulations to provide the department with the ability to specify that during times of conservation, 4-inch mesh gillnets could only be operated as set gillnets and no part of the gillnet may be more than 100 ft from the ordinary high-water mark.

The Kuskokwim Subsistence Salmon Panel was established by the board in October 2014 to seek public input on how to ensure an equitable distribution of subsistence salmon resources throughout the Kuskokwim River drainage and potential tools for equitable distribution in times of low abundance. The panel met in Bethel in January and August of 2015 to discuss and develop options for consideration by the board. Subsequently, in January 2016, the board met in Fairbanks to consider proposals concerning the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim areas. An early season king salmon subsistence fishing closure, like the approach taken in 2014 and 2015, was suggested and agreed to by a group of Kuskokwim River residents who were in attendance. The board passed language that would annually suspend directed subsistence fishing for king salmon in the Kuskokwim River until after June 11. The intent of this closure was to distribute fish throughout the drainage for equitable harvest opportunity. Consequently, the closure also conserves fish for escapement purposes. In 2017, the board provided the department with additional guidance by directing the department to provide at least 1 subsistence fishing opportunity per week with 4-inch or less mesh set gillnets during the closure. This allows subsistence fishermen the opportunity to harvest species other than salmon during the regulated early season closure.

Six-inch mesh set gillnets would allow an additional gear type to implement for subsistence fisheries when king salmon abundance is forecast to provide harvestable surplus, but inseason run strength is unknown. Set gillnets with 6-inch or smaller mesh could be used to provide harvest opportunity for salmon (other than king salmon) early in the season when conservation measures are necessary to protect king salmon and run abundance is uncertain. This gear type would harvest king salmon at an intermediate rate between 4-inch mesh set gillnets and directed king salmon gear.

PROPOSED BY: Organized Village of Kwethluk

(Formerly ACR 9)
