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Federal Subsistence Board News Release



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Federal Public Waters within the Boundaries of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge

2015 Kuskokwim Area Salmon Fishery News Release 7

The Refuge Manager has issued six previous Emergency Special Actions for Federal public waters within and adjacent to Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). All fishing remains closed to non-Federally qualified users. Chinook Salmon fishing remains closed to all user groups on the Kuskokwim River and all of its salmon tributaries. Federally qualified residents continue to have a limited opportunity to harvest Chinook Salmon with Federal Community Harvest Permits. This action closes the scheduled four-inch set gillnet opportunity downstream of Tuluksak on the Kuskokwim River and all of its salmon tributaries.

Fisheries management below the Refuge boundary at the Kuskokwim River mouth and above the Refuge boundary on the Kuskokwim River at Aniak is under the authority of the State in-season manager. For more information regarding subsistence fishing in these areas, please contact the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) at 907-543-2433.

Emergency Special Action **3KS-07-15** closes fishing to non-Federally qualified users and closes Chinook Salmon fishing to all user groups on the Kuskokwim river and its salmon tributaries within the Refuge boundaries. This action also closes the scheduled four-inch gillnet opportunity for Federally qualified subsistence users on the Kuskokwim River downstream of Tuluksak and all salmon tributaries within the boundaries of the Refuge. The use of gillnets is prohibited except under Federal Community Harvest Permits. The affected area is defined as that portion of the Kuskokwim river downstream of Tuluksak to the Kuskokwim river and all salmon tributaries including the Eek, Kwethluk, Kasigluk, Kisaralik, Tuluksak, and Aniak rivers and their salmon tributaries (see Figure 7 on-line). The upper boundary of this closure on the Kuskokwim river at Tuluksak is located at the ADF&G regulatory markers on the main stem of the Kuskokwim approximately half a mile upstream from the confluence of the mouth of the Tuluksak and the Kuskokwim (see Figure 8 on-line). The lower Refuge boundary is a line from the west to the east bank of the Kuskokwim River located at the Kuskokwim River mouth. This boundary begins at a point on the west bank of the Kuskokwim River beginning at Latitude 59.999231°, Longitude -

162.507352° and ends at a point on the East bank of the Kuskokwim River at Latitude 59.999238°, Longitude -162.187927° (see Figure 1 on-line). This closure does not affect the opportunity to harvest Chinook Salmon with the Federal Community Harvest Permits.

In the Kuskokwim River and its salmon tributaries, all species except Chinook Salmon may be targeted by Federally qualified fishers using all legal subsistence gear except gillnets downstream of Tuluksak. There are no gill net restrictions 100 yards upriver of non-salmon tributaries (see Figure 6 on-line). Chinook Salmon incidentally harvested with all other legal gear types must be immediately released.

Biological Rationale

Due to the low Chinook Salmon returns for the last several years and the failure to meet escapement goals at two of three weir projects in 2014, conservation measures are warranted in 2015. The 2014 State of Alaska Chinook Salmon drainage-wide return was estimated at 136,000 fish, well below the annual average of 243,000 fish over the last 25 years. The subsistence harvest in 2014 was estimated to be 12,000 Chinook Salmon, a historically low harvest. The drainage-wide escapement for 2014 was estimated at 124,000 Chinook Salmon. The State of Alaska drainage-wide escapement goal is 65,000–120,000 Chinook Salmon, and the 2015 return is forecasted to be between 96,000 and 163,000 Chinook Salmon. At the upper end of that range, there would be enough fish to meet escapement goals and provide for a moderate Chinook Salmon subsistence harvest. At the lower end of the projected run, however, even a very limited subsistence harvest could impact the likelihood of achieving escapement goals.

The final magnitude of the 2015 Chinook Salmon run is still very uncertain. Based on observations from the Bethel Test Fishery, it is clearly possible that the 2015 Chinook Salmon run is significantly weaker than the 2014. Additional precautionary management measures are warranted until the strength of the run can be fully gauged. Previous special actions allowed Federally qualified subsistence users to target non-salmon species with four-inch mesh set gillnets during scheduled openings. These previously allowed set gillnets are primarily being utilized to target Chinook Salmon. Effort surveys indicate the number of set gillnets has increased substantially as the Chinook Salmon run has progressed and that they are being set in Chinook Salmon locations rather than traditional whitefish locations. In addition, Federal Law Enforcement reports indicate that Chinook Salmon outnumbered all other fish harvested in set gillnets from June 10-14, 2015. Eliminating the scheduled four-inch set gillnet opportunity below Tuluksak is warranted in order to conserve Chinook Salmon.

Presently, both the Bethel Test Fishery and the tagging project near the Johnson River suggest that a higher abundance of Chinook Salmon may be entering the river. However, this closure is warranted to protect this group of fish as it begins to move up-river towards the spawning grounds. Additional fishing opportunity will be provided once chum and sockeye salmon significantly outnumber Chinook Salmon at the Bethel Test Fishery.

Federally qualified subsistence users can still harvest fish, except Chinook Salmon, within the Refuge boundary using other legal gear types that allow for selective harvest, including dip net, beach seine, fish wheel, or rod and reel.

A dedicated message line with up-to-date fishing regulations on the federal waters of the Kuskokwim drainage can be reached at 907-543-1037. Additional information pertaining to Federal closures can be obtained at http://www.doi.gov/subsistence/topics/kuskokwim_2015.cfm or by contacting Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge at (907) 543-3151 or at (800) 621-5804.

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