

DRAFT FEDERAL FISHERIES CLOSURE REVIEW
FCR27-01

Issue

FCR27-01 is a Federal Subsistence Board (Board) directed review of a Federal subsistence fishery closure to the harvest of salmon in the Kanuti River drainage upstream from a point 5 miles downstream of the State highway crossing (hereafter Kanuti River drainage; **Figure 1**). It is the Board's policy to review existing closures every four years so that Federal public lands and waters can be reopened when the closures are no longer necessary. The purpose of this closure review is to determine if the closure is still warranted and to ensure the closure does not remain in place longer than needed.

Closure Location and Species: Yukon River Drainage (District 4A), Kanuti River drainage—salmon

Closure Dates: Year-round

Current Federal Regulation

§___.27(e)(3) Yukon-Northern Area

(ix) You may not subsistence fish for salmon in the following drainages located north of the main Yukon River:

(A) Kanuti River upstream from a point 5 miles downstream of the State highway crossing;

Relevant Federal Regulation

§___.27(b) Subsistence Taking of Fish

(4) Except as otherwise provided for in this section, you may not obstruct more than one-half the width of any stream with any gear used to take fish for subsistence uses.

(16) Unless specified otherwise in this section, you may use a rod and reel to take fish without a subsistence fishing permit. Harvest limits applicable to the use of a rod and reel to take fish for subsistence uses shall be as follows:

(ii) Except as otherwise provided for in this section, if you are not required to obtain a subsistence fishing permit for an area, the harvest and possession limits for taking fish for subsistence uses with a rod and reel are the same as for taking fish under State of Alaska subsistence fishing regulations in those same areas. If the State does not have a specific subsistence season and/or harvest limit for that particular species, the limit shall be the same as for taking fish under State of Alaska sport fishing regulations.

§ __.27(e)(3) Yukon-Northern Area

(i) Unless otherwise restricted in this section, you may take fish in the Yukon-Northern Area at any time. ... You may subsistence fish for salmon with rod and reel in the Yukon River drainage 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, unless rod and reel are specifically otherwise restricted in this paragraph (e)(3).

(ii) For the Yukon River drainage, Federal subsistence fishing schedules, openings, closings, and fishing methods are the same as those issued for the subsistence taking of fish under Alaska Statutes (AS 16.05.060 [emergency orders]), unless superseded by a Federal special action.

(viii) In Subdistrict 4A after the opening of the State commercial salmon fishing season, you may not take salmon for subsistence for 12 hours immediately before, during, and for 12 hours after each State commercial salmon fishing period; however, you may take Chinook salmon during the State commercial fishing season, with drift gillnet gear only, from 6:00 p.m. Sunday until 6:00 p.m. Tuesday and from 6:00 p.m. Wednesday until 6:00 p.m. Friday.

(xi) You may take salmon only by gillnet, beach seine, dip net, fish wheel, or rod and reel, subject to the restrictions set forth in this section.

(xv) Unless otherwise specified in this section, you may take fish other than salmon by set gillnet, drift gillnet, beach seine, fish wheel, long line, fyke net, dip net, jigging gear, spear,

lead, or rod and reel, subject to the following restrictions, which also apply to subsistence salmon fishing:

(H) In the Bonanza Creek drainage and a portion of the Kanuti River drainage (upstream from a point 5 miles downstream of the State highway crossing), you may harvest fish other than salmon with rod and reel only; the grayling harvest and possession limit is 10 per day.

Current State Regulation

Yukon Area—Subsistence

5 AAC 01.225. Waters closed to subsistence fishing

(b) The following drainages located north of the mainstem Yukon River are closed to subsistence fishing:

(1) Kanuti River upstream from a point five miles downstream of the state highway crossing;

5 AAC 01.230. Subsistence fishing permits

(a) Except as provided in this section and 5 AAC 01.249, fish may be taken for subsistence purposes without a subsistence fishing permit.

Yukon River Area—Sport

5 AAC 73.010. Seasons, bag, possession, and size limits, and methods and means for Yukon River Area

(a) Except as otherwise specified in this section or through an emergency order issued under AS 16.05.060, sport fishing is permitted year round in the waters of the Yukon River Area.

(b) Except as otherwise specified in (c) of this section, the following are the general bag, possession, and size limits for finfish and shellfish in the waters of the Yukon River Area:

(1) king salmon 20 inches or greater in length: the bag and possession limit is three fish, of which only two fish may be 28 inches or greater in length;

(2) salmon, other than king salmon: the bag and possession limit is 10 fish, with no size limit;

(c) The following are the exceptions to the general bag, possession, and size limits, and fishing seasons specified in (a) of this section for the Yukon River Area:

(4) in the Dalton Highway corridor (Trans-Alaska Pipeline corridor) within the Yukon River Area, which is described as a corridor five miles wide on each side of the Dalton Highway north of the Yukon River, excluding the Ray River,

(A) sport fishing for salmon is closed;

Regulatory Year Initiated: 1992

Extent of Federal Public Lands/Waters

For purposes of this analysis, the phrase “Federal public waters” is defined as those waters described under 36 CFR §242.3 and 43 CFR §51.3. The entire portion of the Kanuti River drainage described in this closure review (upstream from a point 5 miles downstream of the State highway crossing), is on general domain land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM; **Figure 1**). On general domain lands, Federal subsistence regulations apply only to non-navigable waters.

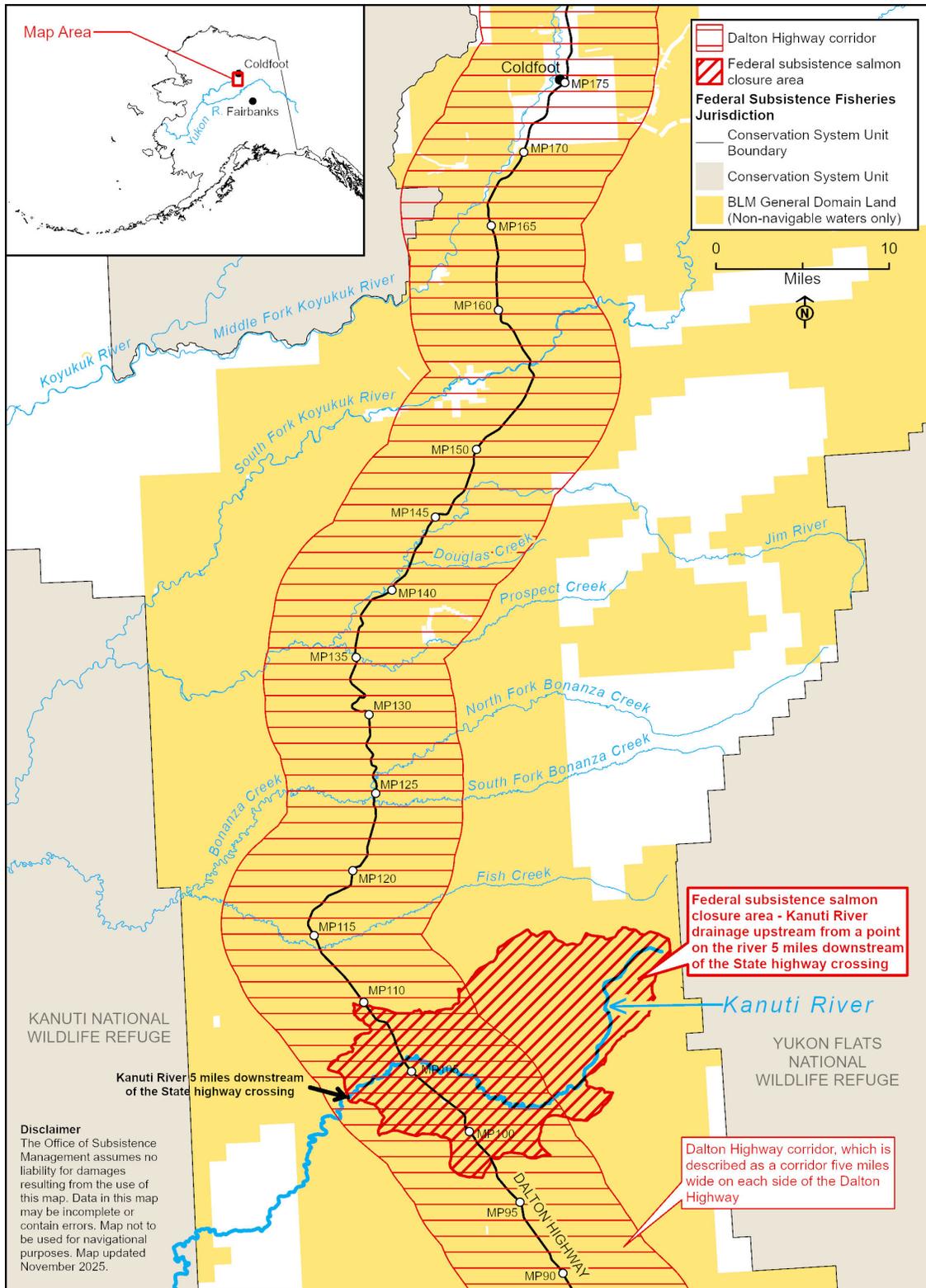


Figure 1. Map of the Kanuti River drainage that is closed to subsistence fishing for salmon.

Customary and Traditional Use Determination

Residents of the Yukon River drainage Districts 1–6 and the communities of Stebbins, Chevak, Hooper Bay, and Scammon Bay have a customary and traditional use determination for salmon in the Yukon River drainage.

Regulatory History

Under State regulations, the portion of the Kanuti River within the Dalton Highway corridor (5 miles on either side of the highway) has been closed to subsistence fishing since the late 1970s, beginning with construction of the Dalton Highway (Holen et al. 2012). The opening of the Dalton Highway to public travel in 1994 provided new access to lakes and streams along the route. Increases in recreational fishing effort and harvest resulted in a salmon fishing closure within the Dalton Highway corridor (Stuby 2021).

In 1992, the Federal Subsistence Management Program promulgated regulations governing the harvest of fish for subsistence uses in non-navigable waters within and adjacent to Federal public lands (57 Fed. Reg. 22940 [May 29, 1992]). These regulations incorporated many provisions from State of Alaska subsistence fishing regulations, including the subsistence fishing closure in the Kanuti River drainage.

In 1999, the Board also adopted Federal regulations for fish in navigable waters within and adjacent to Federal public lands where there is a Federal reserved water right (64 Fed. Reg. 1276 [January 8, 1999]). These regulations do not apply on navigable waters within and adjacent to BLM general domain lands (43 CFR 51.3).

The Federal subsistence fishing closures for the Kanuti River were reviewed by the Board during the 2023–2025 Fisheries Regulatory Cycle (FCR23-02). The Western Interior, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, and Eastern Interior councils recommended rescinding the closures to nonsalmon species only to support subsistence harvest opportunity while also protecting salmon. The North Slope Council recommended rescinding the closures to all species to benefit subsistence uses and provide a Federal subsistence priority in the area. The Seward Peninsula Council took no action because the closures were outside their region. The Board voted to rescind the closures to nonsalmon species only due to current conservation concerns for salmon.

For the 2025–2027 fisheries cycle, the Western Interior Subsistence Regional Advisory Council submitted Fisheries Proposal FP25-16, which requested the Board modify regulations in the Bonanza Creek drainage and a portion of the Kanuti River drainage to allow rod and reel gear only and an Arctic Grayling harvest and possession limit of 10 per day. The Western Interior, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, and Eastern Interior councils supported the proposal. The North Slope Council took no action and deferred to the home region. The Board adopted FP25-16 in deference to the Councils (43 CFR 51.27(e)(3)(xv)(H)).

Closure Last Reviewed: 2023—FCR23-02

Justification for Original Closure

This closure was adopted into Federal regulations from State regulations in 1992 to minimize disruption to the State's continuing fish and game management, because of the uncertainty over the resumption of State management of subsistence, yet still fulfill the requirements of Title VIII of ANILCA (55 FR 27114 [June 29, 1990]).

Council Recommendation for Original Closure

N/A

State Recommendation for Original Closure

N/A

Biological Background

Chinook and summer Chum salmon are present in the Kanuti River, downstream of the closure area (Trainor et al. 2019, ADF&G 2022a). However, few assessment projects have been conducted in the Kanuti River. Aerial surveys were flown in 1969, 1971, 1975, and 1985 (ADF&G 2022b). Chinook Salmon were only observed in 1985 and eight fish were counted (JTC 1985). Summer Chum Salmon were only observed in 1969 and 25 fish were counted (ADF&G 2022b).

Cultural Knowledge and Traditional Practices

The area under consideration in this analysis is within the traditional boundaries of the Koyukon Athabascan people, an area which has been influenced by interaction with Iñupiat. Salmon have always been part of Koyukon and Iñupiat ways of life. Over millennia, both groups developed and practice stewardship strategies (Indigenous/Traditional Knowledge), including harvest methods of fish and wildlife, that sustain their spiritual, cultural and dietary needs (Nelson 1973, Nelson et al. 1978, Caulfield 1983). These strategies are dynamic and specifics may change but subsistence harvests continue to be adaptive and opportunistic; it is customary to harvest what is available. Two central aspects of the sustainability strategies practiced by the Koyukon and Iñupiat include sharing food with others and maintaining a respectful and reciprocal relationship with the fish and wildlife upon whom they depend.

Of those contemporary communities with a customary and traditional use determination for salmon in the Yukon River drainage, Wiseman and Coldfoot are located closest to the Dalton Highway where it crosses the Kanuti River. For this reason, these two communities may be the most likely to fish for salmon in the closed area. In addition to these communities which are located on the road system, Evansville and Bettles are connected to the Dalton Highway via a winter road to Evansville from January through March (Holen et al. 2012). Salmon, however, are not in the river during this time. An Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), Division of Subsistence survey indicated that

residents of Bettles and Evansville focused their subsistence harvests in areas closer to home (Holen et al. 2012). The community of Stevens Village also has access to the Dalton Highway as it crosses the Yukon River, via boat and snow machine (Trainor 2022, pers. Comm.). However, a subsistence survey of Stevens Village conducted from 1984–1985 show that residents focus most of their subsistence fishing activity closer to their community on the Yukon River (Sumida 1988); a more recent ADF&G Division of Subsistence survey did not map subsistence use areas (Brown et al. 2016).

Wiseman and Coldfoot are very small communities located on the Dalton Highway. Both communities were established as the result of the gold mining industry in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Coldfoot was abandoned by 1930, before being re-settled in the 1970s in connection with construction of the Dalton Highway and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline. As of 2018, there were an estimated 27 full-time residents in Coldfoot and four in Wiseman (ADCRA 2025). The area also includes a small number of residents along the Dalton Highway corridor in camps and other isolated households. ADF&G Division of Subsistence conducted its only subsistence survey of Wiseman and Coldfoot in 2012, for the 2011 calendar year.

At the time of ADF&G's survey, there were five year-round households in Wiseman, and all were surveyed. Four of these households attempted to fish, and all households used fish, although in small quantities (Holen et al. 2012). Residents of Wiseman and Coldfoot may harvest non-salmon fish within the Kanuti River closure area with rod and reel under State sport fishing regulations.

Salmon

Wiseman residents traditionally harvested and used small amounts of Chum and Chinook salmon locally. However, in part because of local closures to both subsistence and sport fishing for salmon in place since 1978 (sport fishing for salmon is closed within 5 miles on each side of the Dalton Highway), Wiseman residents primarily harvest salmon at locations far afield, such as in the Copper and Yukon rivers (Holen et al. 2012).

During the 2011 study year, only one of the five Wiseman households fished for salmon (at locations distant from the community), resulting in an estimated 12 pounds of Sockeye Salmon per person, or 4% of Wiseman's total wild food harvest in weight. In addition, Wiseman households received and shared Chinook Salmon, although they did not directly harvest any. All households used salmon (Holen et al. 2012).

Harvest History

Subsistence fishing for salmon is prohibited in the Kanuti River drainage under State and Federal regulations so there is no legal subsistence harvest of salmon in this system. Subsistence harvest of nonsalmon fish has been allowed under Federal regulations since 2023.

Special State of Alaska sport fish regulations apply to all streams within the Dalton Highway corridor. This corridor includes the stretch of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline north of the Yukon River and the land within 5 miles on each side of the Dalton Highway. The Ray River is the only exception, where State

general regulations still apply. The closed area on the Kanuti River overlaps with this Dalton Highway corridor. Within this 5-mile corridor on both sides of the highway, sport fishing for salmon is also closed.

During years when sport fishing for salmon in the Yukon River drainage is not closed or restricted by State emergency order or Federal special action, Chinook Salmon can be harvested outside of the Dalton Highway corridor with a limit of three per day, three in possession over 20 inches (only two can be over 28 inches), and 10 per day, 10 in possession for under 20 inches. Other salmon have a 10 per day, 10 in possession limit.

Sport fish harvest data for the Yukon Management Area show a 10-year average (2014–2023) harvest of 2 Chinook Salmon and 285 Chum Salmon. The 5-year average (2019–2023) is slightly higher at 4 Chinook Salmon and 344 Chum Salmon. Actual harvest in the Kanuti River is likely much lower because these numbers represent the entire Yukon Management Area, not the Kanuti River alone.

The ADF&G issued emergency orders closing Chinook Salmon sport fishing during every year 2014–2025, except for limited opportunities in 2017 and 2019 (Stuby 2025). Fall Chum Salmon sport fishing had more opportunities, with harvest allowed 2014–2019 (Stuby 2025).

Alternatives Considered

One alternative is to rescind the closure. Currently, federally qualified subsistence users cannot harvest salmon in the Kanuti River drainage under Federal subsistence regulations. However, salmon can be harvested under State sport fish regulations in the parts of the drainage outside of the Dalton Highway corridor unless restricted by State emergency order or Federal special action.

Rescinding the closure would establish a Federal subsistence harvest priority for salmon in the area. Federally qualified subsistence users with a customary and traditional use determination for salmon in the Yukon River drainage could harvest salmon in the Kanuti River drainage under 43 CFR 51.27. Federal subsistence regulations would allow subsistence harvest of salmon, and the in-season manager could limit harvests on Federal public lands and waters to federally qualified subsistence users only or close to all users if warranted by poor run sizes. This would give federally qualified subsistence users priority over non-federally qualified users and protect salmon populations from overharvest. Additionally, rescinding the closure would allow unrestricted salmon harvest with all legal subsistence gear other than rod and reel under 43 CFR 51.27(b)(1). In an easily accessible system, this could lead to overharvest, and localized stock depletion. Further, unless restricted by State emergency order or Federal special action, federally qualified users could fish for salmon 24 hours a day, 7 days a week within the Kanuti River drainage (43 CFR 51.27(e)(3)), including the Dalton Highway corridor, possibly leading to enforcement challenges and confusion among user groups.

While salmon populations may be protected by limiting subsistence harvest to certain gear types (for example, rod and reel only) and/or establishing harvest limits, these modifications are not possible through the closure review process and would require submission of a fisheries regulatory proposal. Until a proposal can be submitted, the Federal in-season manager may use their delegated authority to

restrict gear types and/or harvest limits to protect populations in the closure area. If a fisheries proposal is submitted, the Office of Subsistence Management recommends that harvest be limited to rod and reel only and that salmon harvest limits be established. This recommendation is in response to previous Council statements of conservation and overharvest concerns for salmon.

Another alternative is to modify the closure area to align with the Dalton Highway Corridor, defined as 5 miles wide on either side of the Dalton Highway, north of the Yukon River. Under this alternative, Federal subsistence fishing for salmon would remain closed only within this corridor, while restrictions would be removed from Federal public lands outside of it. This modification would affect the waters upstream of the eastern edge of the Dalton Highway corridor. Because these waters are on BLM general domain land, the regulations would apply only to non-navigable waters.

This alternative would align Federal subsistence regulations with existing State sport fishing closures in the Dalton Highway Corridor, which prohibit salmon fishing within 5 miles of the highway. Outside of this corridor, sport fishing is allowed under State regulations, and this alternative would extend similar access to federally qualified subsistence users under Federal regulations. It would also address concerns about Federal opportunity and access by removing Federal subsistence restrictions in areas where sport fishing is allowed.

This type of modification could be implemented as part of the closure review process. It would allow for a more targeted conservation strategy, focusing restrictions on the most accessible and potentially vulnerable areas, while providing subsistence opportunities elsewhere on Federal public lands.

However, this alternative would require careful consideration of the biological status of salmon populations in the Kanuti River drainage in areas outside the corridor. If implemented this alternative would allow unrestricted salmon harvest with all legal subsistence gear other than rod and reel under 43 CFR 51.27(b)(1) within Federal public waters outside of the corridor unless restricted by State emergency order or Federal special action. Federal rod and reel harvest limits for salmon would match State sport fish limits. Establishing harvest limits or restricting gear types to address conservation concerns would require a fisheries proposal be submitted as these modifications are not possible through the closure review process.

A third alternative is to modify the closure by closing the fishery to all users and uses. This would fully protect salmon populations in the closure area. Under this alternative, there would be no subsistence or sport fishing opportunity. Closing to all users and uses would eliminate the current situation, in which Federal public waters are closed to subsistence fishing while remaining open to other uses including sport fishing under State regulations. This alternative would be an unnecessary restriction on non-subsistence uses as sport fish harvest data and recent sport fish closures for salmon suggest the sport fishery does not present a conservation concern. In addition, subsistence surveys indicate subsistence users may harvest a portion of their wild foods under State sport fish regulations.

Effects

Retaining the status quo keeps the salmon subsistence closure in the Kanuti River drainage in place, which helps protect stocks in an easily accessible area where population levels are unknown. Federally qualified subsistence users could still harvest salmon under State sport fish regulations outside of the Dalton Highway corridor using rod and reel unless restricted by State emergency order or Federal special action. However, there would not be an opportunity to harvest salmon under Federal regulations and there would not be a Federal subsistence priority harvest opportunity. Keeping the closure in place also prevents gear like gillnets, which could otherwise remove large numbers of fish, or inadvertently capture a quantity of fish that exceeds harvest limits.

Rescinding the closure would give federally qualified subsistence users a priority harvest opportunity for salmon in the Kanuti River drainage, including that portion of the closure area that is currently open to State regulated sport fishing. However, opening the area without limits on gear types beyond rod and reel, or adjusting harvest limits, could increase the risk of overharvest and localized stock depletion due to easy access within the drainage. Protective measures, such as restricting subsistence harvest to rod and reel or adjusting harvest limits, cannot be implemented through the closure review itself and would require a separate fisheries proposal, though the Federal in-season manager could apply restrictions if needed. Given these concerns, rescinding the closure may pose biological risks unless appropriate harvest restrictions are established.

OSM PRELIMINARY CONCLUSION

- Retain the Status Quo**
- Rescind the Closure**
- Modify the Closure**
- Defer Decision on the Closure or Take No Action**

Justification

Population statuses of salmon are unknown in the closure area, which is road-accessible, allowing easy access to the harvest of salmon. If the closure is rescinded, harvest of salmon would be unrestricted for all legal gear types other than rod and reel, and gillnets could be used to harvest high numbers of salmon. Retaining the closure would protect salmon from overharvest until a proposal to restrict harvest and/or gear types in the closure area could be submitted. Federally qualified subsistence users could still harvest salmon outside of the Dalton Highway corridor under State sport fish regulations with rod and reel while the Federal closure is in place unless restricted by State emergency order or Federal special action. Non-federally qualified users could also harvest salmon under State sport fish regulations.

Retaining the status quo would not provide a Federal subsistence priority harvest opportunity for salmon in the area. However, it would align with past recommendations of the Western Interior, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, and Eastern Interior Regional Advisory councils, which have all expressed support for keeping the Federal salmon subsistence closure in place because of conservation concerns.

This position was reinforced during the 2023–2025 Fisheries Regulatory Cycle closure review (FCR23-02), when all three Councils recommended to retain the salmon closure.

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