

# **Saving our King Salmon:**

## **What to Expect This Fishing Season**

by

Brian J. McCaffery, Acting Yukon Delta Refuge Manager

King salmon on the Kuskokwim are in trouble. Since last fall, there has been a growing local recognition that the problem is serious and that serious actions need to be taken. As has been pointed out repeatedly in our local papers, the run last year was the smallest on record; escapement was also the lowest on record, more than 15,000 fewer than the lower range of the escapement goal. Very few individual tributaries met their escapement goals, and all of the Kuskokwim drainage weir projects reported the lowest passage on record. The king salmon run in 2014 is forecast to be just as bad as it was last year. Thus, we expect there to be very little, if any, harvestable surplus.

In mid-April, the Federal Subsistence Board responded to a proposal submitted by the village of Napaskiak to limit the king salmon fishery to just federally qualified subsistence users. The Board passed this proposal; its passage had two consequences. First, *if* a harvestable surplus is identified, the subsistence use of those fish will be limited to members of just 32 communities along and adjacent to the Kuskokwim River. Second, as a result of the Board's action, management of the Kuskokwim River king salmon fishery within the borders of Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge will be administered by the Federal government. As the Acting Manager of the refuge, I have been designated by the Board as the in-season manager of the Kuskokwim king salmon fishery.

Ever since the board's decision, my salmon management team here at the refuge has been working hard to produce a plan as quickly as possible so that local subsistence users will know what to expect. We have been greatly assisted in this effort by the Office of Subsistence Management in Anchorage and our colleagues from the Kenai Fish and Wildlife Field Office.

We would also like to acknowledge our friends with ADFG and the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group. Over the course of the winter, we have worked regularly with Travis Elison and his colleagues, as well as with the Working Group, to better understand the current crisis, develop appropriate management strategies for this coming season, and to get that message out along the Kuskokwim by visiting communities and consulting with the tribes. Together we have developed broad consensus about the general approach required this season. Although our plan is not identical to what may have been proposed by ADFG, we hope that it incorporates the best and most important elements of what both the state and the working group have been discussing for the last several months. Travis's insights and cooperation have been

invaluable both before and since the Federal Subsistence Board's recent action. We wish him well in his new position down at King Salmon, and we look forward to developing a cordial and constructive relationship with Aaron Potter, the new Kuskokwim area manager for ADFG. We also greatly appreciate the wisdom, passion, and commitment of the Working Group members. Their deliberations and formal motions over the past winter and early spring have provided us with important guidance as we crafted our plan for this summer.

A formal news release explains the technical aspects and details of our plan; in this article, I would like to summarize the overall plan, and provide some additional background and explanations regarding certain aspects of it.

Because the conservation crisis we face is severe, the measures we take to protect the king salmon must be equally serious. The plan includes the following major elements:

- 1) Beginning on May 20 on the lower river, and starting slightly later upriver, gear restrictions will be implemented. Subsistence fishing will be limited to gill nets of 4" mesh or less and limited to 60 feet in length. Only set nets will be allowed.
- 2) A dip-net fishery for chum and sockeye salmon will be opened in mid-June to provide subsistence users with additional opportunities to harvest these species. Any king salmon caught during dip-netting must be released back into the water immediately.
- 3) If by late June, the Bethel test fishery indicates that the strength and timing of the king salmon run is favorable, and if the ratio of chum and sockeye to king salmon is high, we intend to initiate brief openings in the last week of June for the use of 6" mesh gill nets to allow for targeted harvest of chum and sockeye.
- 4) If early season run indicators are strong and/or if compliance with restrictions has been favorable, a limited harvest of king salmon (not to exceed 1,000 fish drainage-wide) may be allowed for cultural and social purposes. This harvest would be allocated via permits to the 32 communities qualifying for king salmon harvest this season.

We do not take such serious restrictions lightly. We fully realize that these necessary conservation measures will impact subsistence activities up and down the river. In light of this, we are indeed fortunate that so many FWS employees involved in Kuskokwim salmon management are Alaskan Natives from this region. As many of you know, Gene Peltola, Jr., our former refuge manager, and now the head of FWS's Office of Subsistence Management, was born and raised here in Bethel. All three Yukon Delta refuge staff members who have been advising me as part of our salmon management team are also Alaskan Natives born and raised in southwest Alaska. In addition, both the field project leader for our Tuluksak weir and the crew leader for our Kwethluk River salmon research are from Y-K Delta villages. The insights, perspectives, and experiences of these employees have played a critical role in the development of the dramatic conservation actions required to save our king salmon.

In the remainder of this article, I would like to address two specific elements of our plan—the dip-net fishery and the limited cultural harvest. Both the state Board of Fish and the Federal Subsistence Board approved the use of dip-nets for harvesting chum and sockeye along the Kuskokwim. Since this method was approved, we've heard both curiosity and concern about it. The intent of authorized dip-netting is to allow subsistence fishers to begin harvesting chum and sockeye in mid-June while still protecting king salmon. If any king salmon are caught in the dip net, they can, and indeed must, be released immediately back into the river unharmed. Although subsistence users on the Yukon have been using dip nets for a couple of years now, their use for salmon on the Kuskokwim will indeed be a new experience for most. My Yup'ik colleagues have assured me, however, that their culture has always shown great flexibility and success when incorporating new technologies into their subsistence activities, from firearms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to snow-machines, outboards, and large-mesh commercial gill nets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We're hoping that the use of dip nets in the 21<sup>st</sup> century might have similar potential. In light of the growing success of salmon dip-netting on the Yukon, we wanted to provide a comparable opportunity for subsistence fishers here on the Kuskokwim for those who desire or need additional opportunities to harvest chum or sockeye salmon for their families.

During consultations in the villages, at Regional Advisory Council meetings, and during Kuskokwim River Salmon Working Group meetings, we've heard repeatedly from residents from the headwaters to the mouth of the Kuskokwim how important king salmon are, not just nutritionally, but culturally and socially as well. Even when acknowledging the need for significant restrictions on king salmon harvest, some Kuskokwim residents have asked for a very limited harvest of king salmon so as to honor both the fish themselves and the cultural heritage of king salmon harvest. Formal proposals, to include one passed unanimously by the Working Group, suggested that a limited harvest of 20-30 kings per village would be much appreciated by many along the river. We have incorporated this idea into our management plan for this season, and may allow a total harvest of up to 1,000 king salmon to be allocated among the 32 villages recognized in the Federal Subsistence Board's recent decision. We realize that such a small allocation will not fulfill subsistence needs; as noted above, we doubt that there will be a sufficient harvestable surplus to provide for a larger allocation. Instead, we are simply hoping that by honoring these requests, Kuskokwim River communities will be able to maintain a tangible connection with the king salmon this year.

If you have any questions about these or any other aspects of our king salmon management strategies for this year, please contact our staff at the refuge (543-3151). Our assistant manager, Patrick Snow, our subsistence resource specialist, Robert Sundown, and I will make every effort to answer your questions and provide the information you need. If you would like to review the analysis behind the Federal Subsistence Board's recent decision, particularly if you would like to see how the 32 qualifying villages were selected, you can find that information on the Federal Subsistence Management Program website (<http://www.doi.gov/subsistence/index.cfm>). On

their home page, you can find the document by clicking on the title, “Fishery Special Action Request FSA14-03 to conduct an analysis under Section 804 of ANILCA.”

As I noted earlier, I do realize that these management strategies will require sacrifice and may produce hardship. In the past, other conservation actions on the Y-K Delta such as the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Goose Management Plan and the moose moratoriums have also required the people to make great sacrifices in the short term so as to guarantee opportunities in the future. Those efforts have paid extraordinary dividends, however, and ultimately provided significant conservation and subsistence benefits. It is my hope that, with your cooperation, our efforts on behalf of the king salmon this season will provide similar dividends for you, your families, and your descendants for generations to come.