ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES
NEWS RELEASE

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Kuskokwim River Salmon Fishery Update #1
Kuskokwim River Inseason Assessment and Run Status

This is an announcement from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Bethel for subsistence salmon fishermen in the Kuskokwim River Drainage.

Kuskokwim River King Salmon Forecast

Recent low returns of Chinook salmon to the Kuskokwim River have resulted in failure to achieve escapement goals, and includes the lowest return on record in 2013. The 2014 forecast of 71,000–117,000 Chinook salmon means there would not be enough fish to meet the average annual subsistence harvest of approximately 84,000 Chinook salmon normally taken on the Kuskokwim River. This normal subsistence harvest would severely deplete the run and the drainage-wide escapement goal (65,000–120,000) would not be met again in 2014. Given consecutive years of low king salmon returns and non-achievement of escapement goals conservation measures are warranted.

2014 Kuskokwim River Inseason Assessment

The 2014 Chinook salmon run timing in the Kuskokwim River is earlier than recent years. The early break up along the river, warm temperatures, and reports from other areas of Alaska (Yukon River, and others) all agree that the salmon run is likely coming in earlier. Early run timing, the forecast of a poor Chinook salmon run, and the fact that subsistence fishing is being restricted at the beginning of the run for the first time, means that managers must be cautious when interpreting inseason information to assure achievement of escapement goals.

The main source of information used to manage the fishery inseason is the Bethel Test Fishery (BTF). This test fishery takes place in the Kuskokwim River just upstream of Bethel, and has been operated there using the same methods since 1984. This project produces an index of the total run passing Bethel, and has been shown to have a relationship with the total run of Chinook salmon that has passed through the Bethel area annually. In a year with typical subsistence harvest (~40,000 Chinook salmon below BTF) the BTF value on each day is comparable with other years on the same day. This is because BTF operation and harvest have been relatively stable in past years, and this consistency allows managers to tell if the run is higher or lower than other years based on the BTF value on a particular day. However because of the changes in harvest this year, evaluation of run timing and total run size is much more difficult.

This year, BTF started operations on May 27th, which is five days earlier than other years. This was done because of the expectation of the early run, and we wanted to be able to verify that Chinook salmon were passing at that point. These test fishing values prior to June 1, were used to help confirm that run timing was early, but the numbers are not included in the total season BTF CPUE. Adding the early information would make comparisons with other years impossible, because all the other years start on June 1, so for meaningful comparison, we must compare the same timeframe.

The reduction of harvest below Bethel has resulted in more fish passing Bethel at this point in time than any other year on record. As of June 16, 2014, the cumulative BTF Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) for Chinook salmon is 335. This is much higher than the 2008-2013 average of 74 for the same date. This is a positive result, so far; however it is difficult to evaluate what the total run size might be. To interpret this we need to know how much of the run is left to come. Our best approximation is that the midpoint of the run this year was around June 13, which is several days earlier than the average. This uncertainty in where we are in the run causes some hesitation, because in other years where the run timing has been extremely early, the run also ends early and very quickly. Again, our preseason planning with fishermen and the Kuskokwim River Working Group, is to manage conservatively this year to ensure achieving escapement goals.

Chum and sockeye salmon are starting to show up in greater numbers, which is also identified with the BTF. Currently cumulative CPUE for chum salmon is 237, which is much higher than the recent average of 38, and for sockeye salmon the cumulative to date is 97, which is also higher than the recent average of 17. The reduction of harvest is likely resulting in an increase in these values relative to previous years as well, so interpretation of how large these runs are is also a difficult to evaluate.

One thing that remains consistent at BTF is the numbers of each species relative to one another. This doesn't change because of the reduction of harvest. If the Chinook number is larger than the chum number on a given day it means there are more Chinook than chum salmon. The most recent daily CPUE for June 15th was 22-Chinook; 19-sockeye; 67-chum. Therefore, we are observing an increase in chum and sockeye, which is allowing managers to consider fishing opportunity for chum and sockeye, while remaining conservative on Chinook salmon harvest.

All Bethel Test Fishery numbers can be found online at:
http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareakuskokwim.salmon#/fishcounts

Summary

- Bethel Test Fishery numbers in 2014 are not directly comparable to previous years.
- The Chinook salmon run is early, but we do not yet know how strong the run is.
- In past years, early runs ended early and quickly.

- Because our primary goal is to meet escapement, fishery managers are being cautious in drawing conclusions about the overall strength of this year's Chinook salmon run.
- Given the fishing power of the Kuskokwim River subsistence fleet, even a short opening with 6" gear during the peak of the Chinook salmon run could prevent tens of thousands of fish from reaching the spawning grounds and undo all the hard work and sacrifice subsistence users have endured this year to ensure escapements are met.
- Increasing numbers of chum and sockeye relative to Chinook salmon in recent days indicate that restrictions on salmon harvests *may* be able to be relaxed in the near future.

Assessment Projects

Lower Kuskokwim River Chinook Salmon Tagging

In an effort to understand the migration speed of Chinook salmon through the lower Kuskokwim River, ADF&G is conducting a new pilot project below Johnson River. This project uses 7.5" & 8" drift gillnets to capture and live release Chinook salmon with tags attached to monitor their migration upriver. As of June 13th, the crew has tagged 22 Chinook salmon.

These fish are identifiable by a plastic tag attached to their back, and a metal antennae coming out of their mouth. If you find one of these tagged fish, please call the number on the plastic tag, and you will be entered into a monthly cash drawing of $200, and a seasonal cash drawing of $500.

Kalskag Area Fishwheel /Drift Gillnet Tagging; ADF&G, KNA

Similar to other years this project has operated, we cooperating with Kuskokwim Native Association to tag Chinook salmon using fish wheels and drift gillnets near Kalskag. Tagged fish that are later recovered at weir projects, allow for ADF&G to estimate the total abundance of Chinook salmon in the middle and upper Kuskokwim River. Currently the crew has tagged 18 Chinook salmon.

These fish are identifiable by a plastic tag attached to their back, and a metal antennae coming out of their mouth. If you find one of these tagged fish, please call the number on the plastic tag, and you will be entered into a monthly cash drawing of $200, and a seasonal cash drawing of $500.

Kuskokwim River Sonar Investigation

In early July, ADF&G staff will survey the lower Kuskokwim River from the Kwethluk "Y" to Johnson River looking for potential sites for a main stem sonar site. We will identify possible sites, and briefly test sonar systems in these locations to see if the technology is able to work.

Kwethluk River Weir; USFWS

This weir is located on the Kwethluk River and monitors salmon passage to spawning areas, as well as serving as a recapture site for tagged Chinook salmon. This weir is currently being installed. High Waters have delayed installation, and operations are expected to start once water levels receded.

Tuluksak River Weir; USFWS

This weir is located in the Tuluksak River drainage and monitors salmon passage to spawning areas, as well as serving as a recapture site for tagged Chinook salmon. This project will be installed towards the end of June.

Salmon River Weir; ADF&G, KNA

This weir is located in the Aniak River drainage and monitors salmon passage to spawning areas, as well as serving as a recapture site for tagged Chinook salmon. This project is planned for installation starting June 18th.

George River Weir; ADF&G, KNA

This weir is located in the George River drainage and monitors salmon passage to spawning areas, as well as serving as a recapture site for tagged Chinook salmon. This project is currently being installed, and operations are expected to start this week.

Tatlawiksuk River Weir; ADF&G, KNA

This weir is located in the Tatlawiksuk River drainage and monitors salmon passage to spawning areas, as well as serving as a recapture site for tagged Chinook salmon. This project has been installed and the first day of operations was June 14th.

Kogrukluk River Weir; ADF&G

This weir is located in the Holitna River drainage and monitors salmon passage to spawning areas, as well as serving as a recapture site for tagged Chinook salmon. The crew is set for departure to this site on June 16th, and operations are planned to start June 23rd.

For additional information concerning this news release:
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