



## YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

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### ***Report to the Yukon River Regional Advisory Councils October 2023***

#### **FRMP PROJECTS**

##### **In-Season Salmon Management Teleconferences:**

The in-season salmon management teleconferences offer stakeholders the opportunity to get first-hand information during the fishing season, have their management questions addressed, and to share traditional ecological knowledge. In a rural and remote area as large as the Yukon River, the in-season salmon management call offers a relatively inexpensive and efficient manner to bring together agency professionals with resource stakeholders across a large geographic area in a meaningful approach to prevent and mitigate conflict.

The calls include Canadian agency and community counterparts. While outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. federal subsistence management program, the in-season salmon management teleconferences promote international cooperation between organizations and individuals facing common salmon management conservation and management challenges.

The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) has hosted in-season salmon management teleconferences since before 1999. Other ongoing efforts to keep fishermen engaged, informed and educated about Yukon River salmon fisheries management have also been hosted by YRDFA such as in-person meetings and in recent years through social media tools. Other tribal organizations and university departments host meetings and workshops to discuss fisheries management and regulatory decision making during the off-season. The in-season salmon management teleconferences build on these efforts by hosting a dialogue among active and current fishermen and women from Yukon River communities. The calls enable people who have participated in multiple efforts to share information between stakeholders and agencies to continue to build their knowledge of in-season fisheries management, skills in active listening, public speaking and experience in participating in public forums.

The multi-year fisheries disasters have taken a toll on everyone along the Yukon River. The 2023 teleconference season was faced with low participation along the Yukon River. We shifted our approach to include fishing reports from the Alaska Peninsula and the Northern Bering Sea. A riverwide survey will be conducted regarding the teleconferences and this will give us the opportunity to transform the calls to include what the Yukon River communities want to hear and discuss.

- End date: 3/31/2024

### **In-Season Salmon Survey:**

The In-season Subsistence Salmon Survey Program is an important communication tool that helps managers ensure that both Yukon River escapement is met and, in a normal year, as many subsistence fishers are meeting their goals as possible. YRDFA hires a local person in 10 communities along the Yukon River stretching from Alakanuk to Eagle to survey fishers during the Chinook salmon season in their community. The observations fishers share with YRDFA surveyors are summarized by the community to protect anonymity and then shared with Yukon River In-season Managers and the Yukon River community through the In-season Salmon Management Teleconferences. This project is funded by the Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program through March of 2024.

This summer we were able to hire surveyors in all 10 participating communities (Alakanuk, Mountain Village, Marshall, Russian Mission, Anvik, Ruby, Huslia, Tanana/Rapids, Fort Yukon and Eagle) and they surveyed fishers during the summer fishing season for 6 weeks and reported on the teleconferences. Seven of 10 surveyors completed their end of season evaluation and reported that surveying fishers who are not allowed to fish or are extremely limited in gear choices is difficult. But they did their best and represented their communities all summer through their reports and on the Teleconferences. They reported that they are able to represent fishers in their communities who do not want to speak on the teleconference or are unable to call in. They encouraged YRDFA to provide incentives for fishers who participate such as a raffle for a gas or stove oil and we will be implementing this in September. The surveyors are also supportive of the development of digitizing this program. YRDFA is working with the Indigenous Sentinel Network to develop a digitized version of the In-season Salmon Survey program. This will allow our surveyors to conduct the survey digitally with their phones and teach fishers how to submit observations on their own. We expect to have the digital version completed later this year.

### **OTHER PROJECTS:**

#### **Federal Funding**

##### Yukon River Watershed Ecosystem Action Plan (USFWS & NOAA)

The people of the Yukon River rely heavily on the watershed's natural resources to feed their families and support their culture. Annual Chinook and Chum salmon harvest is essential for the livelihood of the 76 small, rural villages scattered around the ~330,000 square mile watershed. Since 1997, Chinook salmon runs and harvest have declined. In recent years, both Chinook and Chum salmon runs failed completely with devastating consequences to Yukon River watershed people, families, community and culture. Significant habitat alteration has occurred throughout portions of the Yukon river watershed in Alaska and Canada that could be impacting salmon recruitment, yet no

comprehensive assessment of these alterations and their potential impact to wild salmon runs has been completed.

The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) consulted directly with Yukon river watershed communities and incorporated Indigenous Traditional Knowledge to complete a comprehensive assessment and prioritization of habitat restoration needs documented in a watershed-wide eco-system action plan. The funding will be used to employ residents of the rural Yukon villages to carry out this effort to the greatest extent possible. This project will take place over an 18-month time period and will result in a watershed ecosystem action plan (WEAP) that can be used to understand and develop actions to address the ongoing crisis of salmon declines.

YRDFA plans to accomplish this project in three phases. The first phase will involve consultation with local communities and collection of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK); phase two will involve on the ground data gathering and assessment; and phase three will involve drafting a watershed ecosystem action plan (WEAP) that prioritizes the largest impacts and threats to the watershed. The proposers anticipate that the WEAP will provide the basis for continuing watershed assessments and allow for focused efforts to pursue restoration funding for the highest priority projects that are likely to improve the health of the watershed. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Habitat Restoration Program will provide technical support to create scopes of work and cost estimates for the highest priority restoration projects that are identified by the WEAP. The identification of specific, high priority projects with scoping and cost documents will allow project partners to work with landowners to pursue funding from both public and private sources to improve the health of the watershed.

- End date: December 2024

North Pacific Research Board (NPRB):

***They Told Us There'd Come a Time, Conserving Fish, Preserving Tradition on the Yukon River, A catalog of Elders Warnings:***

This project has been documenting local and traditional knowledge including warnings from Elders about their concerns related to salmon. Our team spent year one reviewing the previously documented recordings in the archives and year two interviewing fishers and Elders. The project is in its final year and we are working on our products and sharing results which includes brochures, reports and short video clips to be shared on social media and our website, and at presentations. To date, our team has conducted 43 interviews with Elders and fishers. They are using their materials to create videos showcasing the project. They each created their first short videos about this project and presented them at the YRFDA preseason meeting in April and the TCC convention in March. The videos are posted on our Youtube page. Also earlier this year, Millena Jordan and Katie Turner attended and testified at the Board of Fish meetings and joined Gabe Canfield at Salmonfest this year to represent YRDFA and share about this

project. The remainder of this program will be spent finalizing our products and results and sharing them at various venues.

- End Date 3/31/2024

### ***Engaging Fishers is Research on Chinook and Chum Salmon:***

This project, funded by the North Pacific Research Board, began in January of 2023 runs through Feb 2026. It has a goal of contributing to an understanding of the drivers of decline and collapse in Yukon Chinook and chum salmon. Through this project we are partnering with four Yukon River communities - Alakanuk, Emmonak, St. Mary's, and Huslia - and another NPRB funded project, Exploring Linkages of a Changing Climate and Productivity of Chinook Salmon led by Drs. Katie Howard and Vanessa von Biela. Local and Traditional Knowledge interviews on historical Chinook salmon health in Alakanuk and Emmonak will inform their biological research on drivers of salmon decline by learning about the historic health of Chinook salmon as they leave the marine environment and enter the freshwater environment. Our second objective is working with fishers in St. Marys and Huslia to monitor river water temperature, create a community response team to assess the damage if there is a salmon die-off and conduct annual salmon carcass surveys. Our third objective is to increase outreach and hold community meetings to share Yukon River salmon research.

We started our work on the TEK interviews when Catherine traveled to Emmonak in March 2023. Videographer Howdice Brown III came along to record the activities and community feedback. We held a community meeting to describe the project and brought speakers to share about Yukon River salmon research. Holly Carroll of USFWS presented about the Ichthyophonous project and Vanessa von Biela of USGS presented about the heat stress studies. While in Emmonak, we were able to conduct 8 TEK interviews. In June, Catherine traveled to Alakanuk to conduct TEK interviews and held a community meeting to discuss YR DFA activities and this project. We had a great community meeting with a lot of ideas and feedback shared. With the help of local assistant Arlene Frances, we were able to conduct 7 TEK interviews.

Objective 2 activities began in June with Serena Fitka's, executive Director, first stop in St. Mary's where we hired David Beans to conduct water temperature monitoring and oversee the temperature logger on the Andreafski River. Serena then joined the YR DFA team Catherine and Michelle in Huslia to begin the water temperature monitoring portion of the project and to hold a community meeting. We hired Francis Nollner to monitor the temperature logger in the Koyukuk River.

- End Date Feb 2026

### ***Exploring Linkages Between a Changing Climate and Productivity of Yukon River Chinook Salmon in Partnership with ADF&G***

We will be working with communities of St. Mary's and Huslia to identify individuals who have the local expertise and interest for participating in field sampling for this project. YR DFA will contract local stakeholders to collect samples alongside project biologists in

the most effective and sensitive manner (no additional pre-spawn salmon mortality). Community leadership are supporting this project, as evidenced by the letters of support, and will be key to ensuring effective community involvement. YRDFA will also facilitate bridging the gap between salmon stakeholders and project investigators through a variety of opportunities to join community and tribal meetings. Since much of the data collected under this proposal will be novel and lacks a pre-decline baseline, YRDFA is also leading a companion project (also submitted to NPRB, “Engaging Yukon River Fishers in Research on Chinook Salmon Declines”) that seeks to collect traditional ecological knowledge about historical changes to the health of Yukon River Chinook salmon from communities who observe these fish near river entry.

- End date June 2026

## **State of Alaska**

### Yukon River Watershed Clearinghouse: A culturally responsive monitoring program.

The Yukon River Watershed Clearinghouse project, funded by the State of Alaska. The goal of this project is to establish a clearinghouse that allows for tracking of both social and ecological changes in ways that are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of the people of the Yukon River watershed. Ultimately we will have a database storing Yukon specific information and help us identify hot spots that need attention to protect salmon.

Locally hired technicians are conducting Traditional Ecological Knowledge interviews with their Elders and we are working to get their water quality monitoring started. The TEK interviews focus on fish health and abundance changes, observed changes, and local concerns of the Yukon River freshwater environment.

In May, we hired technicians and held a training event in Anchorage to kick it off. Since then, two of our technicians have begun working on their TEK interviews. Max Nicholi of Russian Mission has completed his required 4 interviews in his home community and has traveled to his first regional community of Holy Cross where he was able to conduct 3 interviews.

A second training event took place in Ruby and Galena in the month of August/September with three technicians (Max Nickoli, Millena Jordan, and Nita Stevens and Yukon River Inter Tribal Watershed Council. YRITWC conducted a water quality demonstration on the river the first day then conducted TEK interviews the following day.

- End Date 2027

### Subsistence Assistants (ADFG funded)

The Subsistence Assistants program training took place on Wednesday August 30 and Thursday August 31 of this year put on by YRDFA and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. This program helps survey communities and community members who fish during the summer during post-season to get a comprehensive report of the fishing season on the Yukon River. The in-person surveying will begin in Emmonak on September 4 and will move upriver through communities throughout September and October. This year is the first year since 2019 that the surveying is taking place in

person rather than over the phone. The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association will be coordinating the partnership with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to hire local community surveyors to connect with the community, find households to survey, support with transportation, and inform of any community events that may overlap. An end of season report will be crafted following the end of the surveying period.

- End Date: February 2024

Integrating Local and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (LTK) into Anadromous Waters Cataloging and Fish Inventories of select drainages of the Tanana and Yukon rivers 2021-2024:

This project, funded by the Alaska Sustainable Salmon Fund (AKSSF), is a partnership between YRDFA and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Together, we are working with the communities of Tanana, Nenana, and Manley Hot Springs to identify important areas with anadromous fish and other fish for investigations to nominate areas for the Anadromous Waters Catalog and the Alaska Freshwater Fish Inventory. In year one, we conducted interviews and mapping activities with 20 knowledgeable fishers and hunters in the three communities. In year two, the ADFG team conducted their field work to document fish presence, rearing, and spawning. Nominations were made for water bodies supporting anadromous fishes such as least cisco, broad whitefish, humpback whitefish, and/or Chinook salmon. They caught 15 species and made 29 nominations to the Alaska Freshwater Fish Inventory on 30 water bodies including 13 new or extended water bodies added to the Anadromous Waters Catalog, 8 water bodies had new species or species life-phases added, and 33 miles of previously unlisted anadromous fish habitat (streams) were added.

This past summer was an extended field work period due to weather delays on fieldwork planned for the summer 2022. To assist the collection process, we contracted with a local fisher out of Tanana to sample 4 streams that the ADFG team was unable to successfully sample at in 2022. Additionally, the ADFG team was able to travel to Nenana in August to sample in some headwater sites. This completes our fish sampling for this project and now we wait for ADFG to conduct their data entry, nominations and Anadromous Waters Catalog updates. Once complete our final task will be to hold community meetings with Nenana, Manley Hot Springs and Tanana.

- End Date: June 2024

## **IMPORTANT ISSUES**

### **Magnuson-Stevens Act:**

The National Marine Fisheries Service is currently taking public comment on proposed changes or edits to the Magnuson Stevens Act national guidelines - specifically National Standards 4, 8 and 9. The Standards are as follows:

National Standard 4 (NS4) of the MSA states that conservation and management measures shall not discriminate between residents of different states. If it becomes necessary to allocate or assign fishing privileges among various United States fishermen, such allocation shall be (a) fair and equitable to all such fishermen; (b) reasonably calculated to promote conservation; and (c) carried out in such manner that

no particular individual, corporation, or other entity acquires an excessive share of such privilege.

National Standard 8 (NS8) states that conservation and management measures shall, consistent with the conservation requirements of the MSA (including the prevention of overfishing and rebuilding of overfished stocks), take into account the importance of fishery resources to fishing communities by utilizing economic and social data that are consistent with the best scientific information available, in order to (a) provide for the sustained participation of such communities, and (b) to the extent practicable, minimize adverse economic impacts on such communities.

National Standard 9 (NS9) states that conservation and management measures shall, to the extent practicable, (a) minimize bycatch and (b) to the extent bycatch cannot be avoided, minimize the mortality of such bycatch.

The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association encourages participation among its members and has shared out a tool drafted with the Ocean Justice Seekers group to comment on any changes that should be made to the National Standards. See it here: <https://p2a.co/BGlg3yY>

We hope that we can continue to share out resources on these policy documents and encourage Yukon River community members to be involved in these

### **North Pacific Fishery Management Council Environmental Impact Statements**

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council in conjunction with the National Marine Fisheries Service is preparing to make an Environmental Impact Statement on management measures to minimize non-Chinook salmon bycatch, with a focus on chum salmon bycatch. Comments are due September 15 and then drafting will begin after comments are received. This proposal will apply to the participants in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. The scope of the EIS will be to analyze the impacts to the human environment resulting from alternatives for measures to minimize non-Chinook salmon bycatch.

### **Alaska Board of Fisheries - Agenda Change Request**

In early 2023, the Board of Fish met on Western Alaska Fisheries issues and many people came out to testify in support of proposals that helped support Yukon River Salmon and Western Alaska Salmon protections amidst salmon decline and subsistence closures. Yukon River community members have said that their needs are not being met by the current proposals that are in place, and the proposals that would be put forth were not passed this past cycle. YRDFA in collaboration with the Bristol Bay, Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim working group has input an out of cycle agenda change request to meet again on Western Alaska Fisheries issues instead of in 2026. This will be looked at during the work session in October.

### **Meetings:**

North Pacific Fishery Management Council Meeting - October 2-10 2023 / Anchorage, AK at Hilton Hotel Downtown

Alaska Board of Fisheries - Work session October 12 – 13, Hatchery Committee  
October 14, 2023 at Egan Center in Anchorage.

North Pacific Fishery Management Council Meeting - December 4-12, 2023 / Hilton  
Hotel – Anchorage, AK (T)

Yukon River Panel tentative scheduled for January 20-25, 2024 in Whitehorse, Yukon  
Territory, Canada.