



Tuesday, June 27, 2023 @ 10:00am
Weekly River-Wide Teleconference

Every week of the salmon season, the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) hosts a river-wide teleconference for fishermen along the Kuskokwim River to call in and discuss fishing regulations, closures and openers, fish camp updates, Traditional Knowledge, and management action. This call is held tollfree on Zoom and open to the public. In 2023, it will be held Tuesdays at 10am starting May 30 until the end of the salmon season.

15 callers.

- This morning, a 24-hour, 6-inch, 75-foot set net opportunity was announced for 9am on June 30 to 9am on July 1. This aims to help Federally qualified subsistence users target bank-oriented sockeye salmon, as has been done in similar years.
- The Kalskag Line at the bluffs to the downstream end of the Aniak Box is open to 6", 150-foot drift or set gillnet fishing opportunity.
- Aniak to the headwaters is open to 6", 150-foot drift or set gillnet fishing opportunity.
- If you do not have a 75-foot or shorter set net, you can measure out 75 feet of a longer net and fish that while keeping the rest on the shore.
- One caller questioned KRITFC about the Chinook escapement objective: a target range of 100,000 to 120,000 fish, with an ideal target of 110,000, to reach the upper end of ADFG's drainage-wide escapement goal and rebuild Chinook stocks. They noted sonar numbers not looking strong and expressed serious concerns about the Chinook run, especially with this next set net opener, openers above the Kalskag line, and openers above Aniak. He wondered if there is any monitoring above the Kalskag bluff to see if it is local community fishermen or Bethel area folks going up.
- At this time, the Chinook run does not look like the poorest on record according to harvests and Indigenous Knowledge, but it does look weak with sonar and Bethel Test Fishery data. KRITFC shares concerns for the 2023 Chinook run but sets openers based on all data sources.
- Bethel sonar to-date is following the 2013 run, and cumulatively, tracking the 2020 run (which ended up at 106,000 fish). Since sonar began operations late this year because of high water, KRITFC scaled other years' sonar counts back to compare "apples to apples," and this year's run still looks low even when considering the late start.
- A set net opportunity was chosen by KRITFC and USFWS because Chinook salmon have been caught from the Bay to the headwaters; reds are starting to come in; and set net harvests of Chinook are minimal compared to drift net harvests.

- One caller cautioned comparing this run to the 2020 run; in 2020, the Chinook run picked up at the end of June, but we have not seen this in 2023.
- In their management meetings, KRITFC and YDNWR look at all in-season data holistically and try to avoid cherry-picking from data.
- ADFG has been having a tough time with internet and data transferring, and has been delaying some in-season data sharing and posting on their website.
- One caller in Aniak asked about federal rod and reel opportunities in the Aniak Box, and shared apprehension about allowing opportunities for Chinook given the state of the run. They shared the peak of the Chinook run is likely hitting now, but it is still low compared to previous years. If the numbers supported a rod and reel fishery, it would be appreciated. YDNWR staff responded that this opportunity is on hold because it needed clarification from a USFWS Solicitor and the staff lead on this is out.
- Looking at 2021 and 2022 cumulative in-season Chinook salmon harvest to-date compared to 2023: it was roughly 19,000 in 2021 and 21,000 in 2022. This year, it is roughly 20,000 fish.
- On June 23, fishers between Tuntutuliak and Tuluksak caught an estimated 7,000 kings, 4,700 chums, and 9,500 sockeye. There were maybe 40 coho reported that could have been jack kings. This is not the highest harvest we've seen at this time of June, but it wasn't the worst. In-season estimates are produced through the Community-Based Harvest Monitoring program.
- Folks in Nikolai are still waiting for fish to get there. In the middle river and around Aniak, people are waiting for fish to pick up, though nets and fish wheels are starting to pick up. Georgetown families have set their nets. Aniak Test Fish is starting to pick up.
- Roughly 10% of the population in the Kuskokwim drainage lives in communities between Aniak and Telida, and these families take roughly 10% of all salmon harvest. This low impact is part of the justification of leaving fishing open 24/7 above Aniak and even Kalskag.
- KRITFC is encouraging the use of alternative gear types, like dipnets, which are open 24/7 to Federally qualified subsistence users, who can keep all fish caught.
- The Kuskokwim chum salmon run is just starting. Harvests have been higher this far to-date than the previous two years, but numbers are still concerningly low and conservation is in effect. This year, we estimate 7,700 chum salmon have been harvested between Tuntutuliak and Tuluksak; in 2021 and 2022, by this time in June, there hadn't been 1,500 chum harvested. A KRITFC In-Season Manager commented that rarely harvests do not reflect the abundance of the run.
- Sockeye have been really strong in recent years, especially between the mouth to the Stony River. There are good sockeye salmon harvests this year at around 15,000 sockeye harvested to-date in the lower river this year.
- Fishers in Tuluksak and Akiachak have asked for more set net opportunities this year during drift closures to help target sockeye and whitefish while conserving kings and chums.
- In Quinhagak, one caller said it looked like a commercial fishing opener last week. They counted 20 boats in a day as the tide changed. Not seeing anyone out there today. Most people have about what they want in terms of kings and are hanging and drying.
- Until July 15, ADFG regulations that limit fishing to one full 6" net per boat and no fishing on Sundays are in effect.
- In Tuntutuliak, some families are almost done fishing with a mixture of kings, chums, and reds – mostly reds and chums. One caller said there are chums coming up the river in higher numbers than recent years.

They said it's not as pressured now as it has been, though there are still some people going out less intensely to fish the Tunt River.

- One caller asked if there would be an effort next year to put large boundary markers at the mouth of the Kuskokwim. They said fishermen don't want to be cited when they go to fish. YDNWR staff said this has been explored in the past but is difficult because of the width of the river mouth, but can be looked into again.
- In the Bering Sea, as of June 22, there have been just over 13,000 king salmon and just shy of 2,000 chum salmon caught as bycatch in groundfish fisheries. Not all of these are headed to AYK rivers, but every fish counts. The Bering Sea fisheries have started their B-season, and we expect to see more chum salmon bycatch in the next months.
- In Area M, the seiners, set netters, and drifters are all in different openers between 44 to 88 hour openers, depending on their district. As of June 24, over 153,000 chum salmon have been reported to be harvested. We know of at least one boat that was cited for "not retaining all salmon," which we interpret as chum-chucking.
- There is a Bristol Bay-Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (BBAYK) coalition that meets weekly to discuss Area M and elevating this issue with the state and national congressional representatives. This group will submit an Agenda Change Request to the Board of Fisheries to request Area M is taken up again out of cycle, following the February 2023 BOF meeting and this season's totals. If you are interested in joining the BBAYK coalition, please contact Karen Gillis at karen@bsfaak.org or 907-887-1148.
- The Kwethluk River screw trap to monitor salmon smolt closed operations on June 14, and partners and crew are transitioning to the Kwethluk River weir. The weir crew is facing very high water and has installation on hold.
- The Takotna River weir crew is rebuilding some weir parts and hopes to be fish-tight by July 1.
- In McGrath, the water started coming up last week, with 1" of rainfall in the Alaska Range, and a thunderstorm that came through town. Lots of water and debris coming downstream.
- We hope to have the Kwethluk, Takotna, and George river weir crews collect environmental DNA, or eDNA, to monitor spawner abundance.
- KRITFC will work with a post-doc this summer to do drone-based aerial surveys of salmon spawning grounds up some of our tributaries. The researcher wants to work with communities and schools to get local students trained up to be drone pilots.
- This year, KRITFC has hired 14 harvest monitors—the most we've ever hired—to collect anonymous harvest information after openers. If you are asked by someone in your community, or by ONC Fish Techs in Bethel, about your harvest, we appreciate if you take 5 minutes to answer their questions.
- With dipnets and other alternative gear type open 24/7 for fishing throughout most of the river, KRITFC is hoping to promote these as a way to keep fishing. Some of our staff is out right now to conduct a feasibility study and find good locations, techniques, and depths to harvest sockeye. We will share what we find out.