



Tuesday, July 11, 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.

13 callers.

- There is a 6-hour drift and set net opener today, 7/11, from 9am–3pm, with the same gear restrictions as we’ve seen the rest of the season. We hope to produce a harvest estimate following this opener.
- There was a 24-hour set net opportunity from 7/7 at 5pm to 7/8 at 5pm. There was no harvest estimate from this opener because inclement weather prevented an aerial survey, but surveys show about 4 kings, 8 chum, and 12 sockeye per boat.
- Federal waters of the Aniak Box opened to rod & reel fishing on 7/7, with no bag limits to sockeye, pinks, or jack kings (less than 20”); 2 per day/2 in possession limit for kings over 20”; and no retention of coho or chums. This is to let Aniak residents target sockeye and jack kings.
- The Kalskag Line to the lower end of the Aniak Box is open to 6” gillnet fishing 24/7 per FWS regulations, as is Aniak to the headwaters per ADFG regulations.
- ADFG restrictions in Kuskokwim Bay are no fishing on Sundays, and only one 300-foot net can be used per boat. These regulations are in effect until 7/15, when they will lift, unless otherwise announced by ADFG.
- Bethel Test Fish is still catching a few kings. We are no longer tracking the lowest run on record, but the run is still lower than many recent years.
- BTF and Bethel sonar are still showing poor Chinook and chum runs, but harvests and local observations and Knowledge indicate these runs are stronger than shown. Uncertainty about this discrepancy.
- People are catching more chum salmon than in 2021 and 2022, and BTF and sonar show the run is so far bigger than 2021 and 2022, which gives us hope – but 2023 chum returns are nowhere near historical averages and abundance.
- KRITFC staff has been investigating the best techniques, locations, tides, and depths to dipnet for sockeye salmon. Dipnetting is open 24/7 to Federally qualified subsistence users, who can harvest all salmon, and non-Federally qualified subsistence users, who can harvest only sockeye. Dipnetting can be very effective, with staff once even catching 8 fish in 10 minutes.

- In Crooked Creek, the harvest is good, catching in drifts and fish wheels. One fisher caught 18 reds and 12 chums in their fish wheel. Smokehouses are filling up. Crooked Creek had a late start to the season because of rebuilding after the breakup flooding this year.
- One caller would like to hear updates from Sleetmute, Stony River, and Red Devil. KRITFC will reach out to our Commissioners from those communities.
- One caller from Bethel has been done fishing since the June 30 set net opener and is looking forward to berry picking. They have not seen any berries yet or heard berry reports yet, but salmon berries in the Bethel area ripen earlier than near the coast, so we should be hearing soon.
- It has been a very cold July, which is surprising, and opposite the blazing temperatures in Canada and other parts of the world.
- For in-season harvest estimates from Tuntutuliak to Tuluksak, we estimate about 20,760 kings, 9,320 chums, and 23,920 sockeye have been harvested this year during federal fishing opportunities. These do not include dipnet or non-spawning tributary harvests, so they are minimums. King and sockeye harvests are on par with recent years, but the chum harvest this year has been higher than recent, dismal years.
- In Tuntutuliak, most people are done fishing for food for the winter. They're smoking salmon. One caller's family put away fish from the smokehouse yesterday. There were few boats going down to the Kuskokwim to fish today during the opener, maybe because of concerns about the misty weather, though at least there are no flies. One caller mentioned the berries will need warm weather to blossom. Chum salmon are still swimming past Tuntutuliak and coming upriver.
- Takotna River weir has been fish tight and operating since 7/7. KRITFC staff are flying out to Takotna now to help install a Starlink unit to help with operations, as well as do eDNA training.
- Kwethluk River weir is waiting for water levels to drop to complete install and begin operations. All the equipment is in, minus the fish passage chutes to count the fish, but fish are still able to move through. Hoping to begin operations on 7/14.
- eDNA collection is paused at the Kwethluk weir, in operation at the George weir, and Andrew and Avery will train the Takotna weir crew in Takotna this week as well as Kwethluk later this week. This is a collaborative project between KRITFC, ADFG, and University of Alaska Fairbanks to explore new, cost-effective, and non-water level dependent methods to monitor salmon spawners.
- Post-doc Danny Auerbach will be on the Kuskokwim from July 15-30, and again in September, to pilot a project that uses drones to count spawners. A key element of this project is working with Tribal communities and schools to train students to become FAA-certified drone pilots and get involved in fisheries research. During Danny's time on the Kuskokwim, he will work with KRITFC staff and local boat drivers to map out spawning areas up the Kwethluk and other areas.
- The Community-Based Harvest Monitoring program has hired 14 harvest monitors in 8 lower Kuskokwim communities. Our monitors have collected over 350 interviews during 9 fishing opportunity periods.
- We are piloting a study to investigate the best times, tides, places, depths, and techniques to dipnet for abundant sockeye salmon during gillnet closures. We've been using a 5-foot diameter, 4.5" mesh dipnet successfully from a slowly moving boat, from a parked boat on shores or in eddies, and from a beach.
- One caller asked if FWS and ADFG are feeling secure with KRITFC data. There don't seem to be questions about data quality, but just swiftness of data transfer. At the Takotna weir, the crew is hoping that Starlink will help transfer the data more easily.

- One caller mentioned that there is no data to show non-spawning tributary harvests. They said most salmon caught are not white yet, but still fresh, and chums are doing better than last year. The big ones are going upriver. The big ones that bump their noses on smaller mesh nets and move on.
- Last year, Takotna weir was fish tight on July 10, and the Kwethluk weir was fish tight on June 15. That is almost a month difference for the Kwethluk. By this time last year at the Kwethluk, 4,958 kings had been counted, and there usually isn't much passage until the end of June and early July. There are ways to patch holes in estimates as long as the days missed aren't too much.
- A of 7/6, Chinook bycatch in Bering Sea groundfish fisheries is 13,343, and chum bycatch is 5,857. This is a jump in chum salmon bycatch, and some area hot spots have been triggered and closed to trawling.
- Area M chum intercept as of 7/9 is 289,923, and seiners, drift, and set netters are currently open for 36 hours (6am on 7/10 until 6pm on 7/11). This is an underreported number because of ongoing chum-chucking in Area M. Unimak Island is a fishery area in Area M.
- One caller mentioned that a subsistence representative on a bycatch committee, Oscar Evon, did not speak up for him. They asked if KRITFC has contact with him to let him know, and said they were sorry for the negative report.
- The total Chinook escapement on the Kwethluk in 2022 was 6,808 fish, which met its escapement goal of 4,100–7,500 fish. One caller said since 2023 BTF Chinook catches are low, and we don't have accurate weir counts this year, escapement may be at the low end or not meet the escapement goal.
- One caller shared his knowledge that the fish come in and use their noses to smell their ecosystems, so fish will smell their way home. They wished test fisheries would bring salmon to the middle river to give them away.
- In Tuntutuliak, when the sandpipers (*iiyuaq?*) arrive and start walking the riverbanks, there will be kings swimming upriver.
- One caller shared that we always depend on *Ellam Yua* to provide animals for us. During the Honor the Salmon day on 7/10, we were happy to thank *Ellam Yua* for salmon again this year.