



Tuesday, July 25, 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.

12 callers.

- There were a series of set net opportunities from the mouth of the Kuskokwim to the Kalskag line on July 17, 19, 21 (all 12 hours); and July 24 and 26 (6 hours). Effort has been low (FWS counted only 5 nets during aerial surveys last wee), with most people done fishing until silvers or transitioning to berry picking, but some people are still catching reds, chums, kings, and starting to see silvers.
- On 7/17, we estimate 17 kings, 108 chum, and 180 sockeye were harvested in the 12-hour set net opportunity.
- On 7/19, we estimate 13 kings, 159 chums, and 136 sockeye were harvested in the 12-hour set net opportunity.
- Fishing with set or drift gillnets is open 24/7 from the Kalskag Line to the lower end of the Aniak Box, and from the upper end of the Aniak Box to the headwaters.
- Alternative gear types (rod and reel, dipnets, fish wheels, beach seines) are open throughout the drainage in the mainstem Kuskokwim, except in the Aniak Box, and chum salmon must be released above Aniak. Alternative gear types are not allowed in spawning tributaries.
- Coho salmon are starting to come in, and so far, the numbers look better than last year. It is early in the season and we will keep our eyes on this.
- Weir projects are started to count kings, chums, and sockeye salmon.
- The king salmon, chum salmon, and sockeye salmon runs are 90% or more complete according to historic run timing. Each species will continue to run upriver for a while, especially chum, which run until freeze-up.
- 3% of the coho salmon run is complete as of yesterday, so it's just the beginning of the run, but we are seeing promising numbers. Bethel Test Fish has caught 165 silvers cumulatively to this day, which is higher than the 5-year average of 30 fish as well as the historic average of 120 fish. Tracking like a good year so far.
- Sonar counts for silvers are better than recent years, as well.
- In McGrath, fishermen are hoping there won't be a month-long fishing closure on all species to protect coho, as happened last year. There is hope that these numbers will continue to build and not be as poor as last year. The water has been high but is coming down with heat.
- One caller asked why ADFG has liberalized management in the Kuskokwim Bay. ADFG gear and day restrictions in the Bay were in effect until July 15 to protect Chinook and chum salmon per Board of Fish decisions. There was no mention of coho salmon protections.
- The Kwethluk River weir became fish-tight on 7/15 after high water delays and is counting kings, chums, reds, and pinks.
- Takotna River weir has been operating since 7/7 but paused operations due to high water and restarted on 7/20.
- eDNA collection is happening at the Takotna, Kwethluk, and George weirs.

- The Community-Based Harvest Monitoring program has hired 14 harvest monitors in 8 lower Kuskokwim communities. Our monitors have monitored 14 openers so far this season and have collected about 400 interviews.
- We piloted 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.
- Post-doc Danny Auerbach is on the Kuskokwim with us until July 30 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.
- The Salmon-Aniak weir has been fish tight since 7/14, will need to adjust the numbers because it started the season late due to high water and missing equipment. This weir will be in operation until 8/15.
- Using in-season data from Bethel Test Fish and sonar, as well as harvests, the estimated Chinook escapement is around 91,000 fish, which is within the ADFG escapement goal range (65,000-120,000) but falls short of the upper-end target that KRITFC and FWS set (100,000-120,000).
- The chum salmon return looks stronger than 2021 and 2022, but not as strong as 2019.
- In Aniak, the water has been so high that not many people have been taking advantage of the rod and reel opportunity in the Aniak Box. One caller estimates about 12 kings were harvested.
- One caller complemented KRITFC and FWS on their Chinook management this year. They said they followed their management plan and goals and did their best to give people opportunity to fish, even in a challenging year where the in-season data was not always congruent.
- The Salmon-Pitka Fork weir has counted about 2,080 Chinook (last year at this time, it was 721 fish, though still half of what was seen in 2017, 2018, and 2019), and most were males from the early part of the run. Some people think the fish are stacked up in some eddies below the weir, which they tend to do.
- You can find salmon counts here:
<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareakuskokwim.salmon#fishcounts>
- Chinook bycatch in the Bering Sea is 13,392 fish as of 7/20. Chum bycatch in the Bering Sea is 18,316 as of 7/20; this number is climbing (11,000 more chum were bycatch in the last week), and some trawler closure areas have been triggered.
- Area M chum intercept is 426,318 fish as of 7/22. We know of at least one reported count of a vessel "not retaining all salmon caught," which we interpret as chum-chucking.
- NOAA Fisheries has released a notice of intent to start the scoping process for a chum salmon environmental impact statement (EIS). Tribes and the public may submit comments through 9/15. This is a significant step towards bycatch management on the federal level, and parallels action underway to hopefully better protect chum salmon from trawler bycatch at the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. If anyone would like help submitting a comment, please reach out to KRITFC. NOAA Fisheries should be presenting this EIS in our communities and initiating Tribal Consultation, and our communities should be getting involved in this. One caller suggested KRITFC should put together presentations and do outreach in Kuskokwim communities to inform people, and otherwise be involved in this opportunity. More information at https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/07/11/2023-14581/notice-of-intent-to-prepare-an-environmental-impact-statement-for-minimizing-non-chinook-salmon?utm_source=federalregister.gov&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=subscription+mailing+list.
- FWS and KRITFC will meet on 07/31 to discuss management for silver salmon. FWS will be meeting today to review their past management actions and brainstorm next steps. FWS also will be meeting with Unit 4 (Kwethluk, Akiachak, Akiak, and Tuluksak) to discuss fishing and planning.
- KRITFC is mourning the death of our Elder Advisor, Robert Lekander, who passed away Tuesday morning. Robert provided sincere, practical, traditional wisdom and guidance to our organization since its beginning, and his friendship and leadership is deeply missed.