

**Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission  
Weekly River-Wide Teleconference  
Monday, June 28, 2021 | 10am AKDT**

**Join by computer:** <https://zoom.us/j/5694903415>

**Join toll-free by phone:** 833-548-0282

**Meeting ID:** 569 490 3415

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**About:**

Every Monday of king salmon season, the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) and Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (YDNWR) co-host 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 toll-free on Zoom and open to the public. In 2021, it will be held Mondays at 10am from May 17 to July 12.

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**Hosts on this call:**

Mary Peltola, Executive Director of KRITFC

Boyd Blihovde, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Manager

**People on this call:** 16

**Summary:**

- The latest data from Bethel Test Fish and sonar do not look promising for Chinook or chum salmon. KRITFC calculations after the mid-point of the Chinook salmon run estimate a total run size of 81,000 fish, well below the KRITFC-USFWS escapement target of 110,000.
- There have been challenges to coordinating recent federal and state action that has caused confusion along the river.
- Fishers are hoping there will be more federal harvest opportunities soon, especially before maggots arrive. At the same time, fishers also want to conserve king salmon for future generations.
- It could take 12 years per life cycle to rebuild king salmon populations – or a minimum of 60 years for 6- to 7-year-old Chinook salmon – on the Kuskokwim.

**Full Notes:**

- **Mary Peltola – KRITFC:** Good morning everyone. Boyd, would you please start us off today?
- **Boyd Blihovde – USFWS/KRITFC:** Sure. I know that there's confusion out there and people wondering what to do. From a USFWS perspective, working with KRITFC, we feel like we've done a good job to try to get consensus from the local people who need fish and trying to determine what they need to do here locally. My view is that the State has not done that. They don't have a mechanism to do anything outside of the Working Group, which voted to not have an opener and they still have decided to stay with the announcement of fishing today. We feel like we've bent over backwards to communicate with the State, KRITFC, and the community at large. We know people want to fish, but we also know people want fish to be around for the future, too. They don't want to see them go away. Spencer Reardon and

Aaron Moses are here in the office with me, and we're trying to compare notes on the biology and what the numbers look like. It just doesn't add up. I still am concerned that we are not going to meet our more conservative objective from a Chinook standpoint, but I'm on the edge if the State's going to meet their bottom-end escapement goal, which is 65,000. I'm concerned for sure, and now, I'm starting to shift my focus – I think we all are – to concern over chum. The way the numbers look for chum are even more drastic. I think we're going to have to have that conversation next about our concerns over chum and what we can do to conserve chum this season. I think all of our conversations have revolved around what to do next for the people who want to fish. I just hope that the "politics," or personal relationship issue, with the State will be set aside and that they'll work with us on what is right for salmon conservation. Even those that want to fish more than anyone else, who have been opposed to restrictions in the past, see that the numbers are so poor. They see what's happening on the Yukon, and they understand that we need to protect fish here on the Kuskokwim, at least this year because the numbers look so bad. I hope everybody knows that we're working together to try to identify the best day to have an opener. And not to just pick a day on the calendar because it looks good on a management plan or on the calendar – but to see what's the best thing for the people and salmon populations here.

- **Mary Peltola – KRITFC:** Alright, thank you. I want to emphasize the point that Boyd is bent over backwards to work with the State, and the State is obviously not concerned about working with the fishermen or the Refuge, and certainly not with KRITFC or even their own Working Group. Every motion that the Working Group has made this summer, ADF&G has done the opposite. They've also yelled at the Working Group advisory body members. I want to make it clear that there is a willingness to work together from KRITFC's and the Refuge's point of view. It does not feel like there's any spirit of cooperation [from ADF&G]. As long as I've worked here, there's always been an emphasis of speaking clearly, being plainspoken and with common sense, and communicating in a way that reduces confusion and chaos. This action shows that this spirit is not there on the State side. Additionally, every year prior, the weekend indexes from Bethel sonar and Test Fish have been shared. This year is different; they are not sharing weekend indexes during the weekend. I think that that data from the weekend will be shared soon. Kevin, do you have anything new to report from indexes over the weekend?
- **Kevin Whitworth – KRITFC:** Yeah, I can share that KRITFC and USFWS have been working on assessment updates as best we can. As of June 26, we're now in the time period when we're passed the 50% mark for the Chinook salmon run. We are able to get a little bit of an idea of what the run is looking like – we're past that "uncertainty period" where we don't have a lot of data in the early season. Looking at Bethel sonar as of June 26, we're looking at an end-of-season estimate of about 81,000 Chinook. This run is now tracking below the 2018 run, which is concerning, and well below the KRITFC-USFWS escapement target of about 110,000 fish. At Bethel Test Fish, we're at a point now where it's predicting the end of season cumulative effort because we're past 50% of the run. It's saying we're now below the 2020 run, and last year was a very low run. We were under the USFWS and KRITFC escapement goal. According to BTF as of Saturday, it's looking below the 2020 run. Very concerning numbers at this point.
- **Steven Alexie – Napaskiak:** I was quite happy that the State opened today. I have 13 kings hanging from the 3 federal openers. Boyd said they've bent over backwards; no, it's the other way around. The end users like myself have been bending our backs over for the past decade. We've just heard a report from Kevin that said you guys should be at the point that you guys can tell us how many fish have passed, what has passed, instead of saying this might be the case. We have been doing this for the past

decade. I have been fishing this area since wooden boat times, and my late father used to tell me that when the big kings have passed, the kings get smaller. Last opener I caught 2 small sized kings. From my experience, chums are cold water fish, they like to swim deeper. Reds swim on the sides of the beach where it's a little warmer. We are not under chum restrictions. With the 13 fish I have, I am worried. These dry fish are what we snack on when we don't have enough money to go to the store; they get us by until dinner. I know you guys are highly concerned about chums, but they'll come in. They might be a little late, but they'll come in. When I was about 5 years old, my late grandfather used to say that if chum is abundant one year, the next it might be reds. They alternate every year. I've been debating whether I should go out today because we froze fish from the last opener, and we've had our last batch. It brings us spiritually down. Fish is a part of who we are, and when stuff drags on too long, it starts hurting. The river is our refrigerator. We'd like to conserve for the future; what's one opener going to do when the majority has passed. These past few openers, you've counted nearly 15,000 fish being taken or so. If we take a bite out of the chums, is it really going to hurt? What's really hurting is us, the end users. Mr. Boyd, you aren't going to come to my fish camp and fight the maggots off the fish I'm trying to dry. It's full-time work when that time comes and you're trying to dry fish, fighting maggots and taking them off every couple hours just to have good food. I'm happy we're trying to conserve for the future, but what is one opener going to do? Before maggot season comes, I hope you guys do consider opening. Thank you.

- **Boyd Blihovde – USFWS/KRITFC:** Thank you, Steven. I hear you. I understand the frustrations a bit. I also don't like restrictions. One thing you said that I really want to address is what it matters if there's one more opener. I don't necessarily disagree with you. This issue of having an opener today wouldn't have been such a challenge if the State had worked with us. When I say I've bent over backwards to try to work with them, I'll tell you what actually happened. There were 4 or 5 different calls made to the State to work with us on the date and times of the opener. We needed more data, and we didn't understand why Monday was such an important date. Why couldn't we have shifted the date or worked with the Elders to negotiate those details? The response was that, sorry, that's off the table. That's all I meant. We've got to work together and be human with each other, to be able to go back and forth. I feel like KRITFC has been very honest with what they want to do and don't want to do, and I don't feel like it's been a two-way street with ADF&G. I think everybody knew that there would need to be another fishing opportunity because people need that, and that's one of our responsibilities at USFWS. Even in the worst years, we're obliged to provide some opportunity for subsistence users because you are our priority. We were going to have those opportunities, but I don't know why it needed to be today from 10am to 10pm.
- **Steven Alexie – Napaskiak:** It should be a two-way street. Even if you guys don't agree with the opening, I guess you guys should have one more opener. It's been raining and raining, and I've had a couple of fish that have turned sour. You've got to keep that smokehouse going every day. Once those maggots come, it's going to be a full-on, full-time job. You know that, Mary, as a lifelong Kuskokwim area fisherman. We try to get things done before July, because July is a hot, humid, maggot month. If we get all the fish done before then, that's fine, but when the maggots come full-on they're unstoppable. We can try to do preservatives and other stuff, they don't care for that. The next time the State wants an opener, personally go to them. You guys are in Bethel; it's just a drive away. From what I heard from the ADF&G people, the river's open for Federally qualified users right now. I called them up to see if I went fishing and USFWS troopers cite me, if they would dismiss my case. I'm hoping off right now to see what actions you guys are going to take.

- **Mary Peltola – KRITFC:** I hear you loud and clear about the maggots and the rot, how they sour on the skin. Even this year, I was going to pull some of the strips out that we had from the first openings, but it rained really hard. I put the fans back on them. I have 3 fans going in the smokehouse now and I had to build stuff in my backyard in Bethel to have power because generators only go as long as you have gas in them. This has been the way that I've tried to come up with solutions. I know when the flies come, it really is a full-time, around the clock thing, saving your fish from maggots. The other thing is KRITFC and YDNWR have for 4 or 5 years now agreed on a 110,000 fish escapement. We're interested in rebuilding the Chinook salmon run to the way that we grew up fishing, where our greatest fear was catching too much. The Refuge's mission is to rebuild. ADF&G has no mission to rebuild. They're comfortable, even if it's a 60,000 escapement, whereas we're at 110,000. That's where we are right now; we're not going to meet 110,000. I heard you talking about how frustrating it is to hear about best-guessing. Fish management is not precise. I think KRITFC has done the best job in the past 4 years balancing escapement and harvest. But there's no way to know, and even at the end of the season, we're still using best guesses. Unfortunately, it's not an exact science. The Refuge's mission is different than ADF&G's. The other long-term problem is when the State manages, they manage for all users in Alaska. Every user is on equal footing. Under federal management, only people who live on the river can harvest in times of shortage. Obviously, there's not even enough Chinook in the river for people who live here, let alone everyone in the State of Alaska who would want to come here and fish.
- **Adolph Lupie – Tuntutuliak:** *[Speaks in Yugtun. Translation follows.]*
- **Christopher Tulik – USFWS/YDNWR:** Adolph said he was cited back in the days when the Chinook run was really poor. He ended up going to the court that winter. He's been with the Council there and has been working to represent Tuntutuliak for some time. He's been chosen as the Fish Commissioner for KRITFC. He greatly supports and appreciates the work that KRITFC does. The other point is that he touched on the conservation of Chinook salmon. Thinking about our grandchildren, that they may have some to fish and eat. I guess those are the main points that he touched on. I can't remember a whole lot of what he said. Qu yana.
- **Adolph Lupie – Tuntutuliak:** Thank you Chris for translating. You got the main points: conserve our fish for our younger generations to come. Thank you!
- **Steven Alexie – Napaskiak:** I'd like to respond to Adolph. I'd like to thank him; he's bringing up a lot of good points. My point is that we've been doing this for the past decade. There's something going on out there that's taking our king salmon that are supposed to return to the Kuskokwim and Yukon. The conservation needs to expand further out to the ocean, not just those fish that are going up to the tributaries to spawn. I'd like to start seeing kings rebound in the next couple years because we've been doing this for 10 years. A mature salmon returns to spawn when it's 6 to 7 years old. Within the next couple years, if we don't see any positive significant outcomes from this struggle we've been having, the conservation needs to expand out to the ocean.
- **Mary Peltola – KRITFC:** I hear you. One of the things we're finding out is it's not like moose rebuilding. One hundred years isn't a long time to salmon. There was a scientific paper put out talking about how rebuilding a depressed stock takes 12 generations. If our fish are coming back at 5 years old, and it takes 12 generations, that's 60 years. Steven, Adolph, and I probably won't see the fruits of our labor, even if we're in conservation mode until we die. I agree with you that we need to start making this a much bigger conversation about what's happening in the oceans and trying to factor in global climate change. We had so many winters with no snowpack, just brown tundra. I'm sure on some level that had to have affected salmon. These are much bigger conversations, and every day of the year, we're

having those long-term, conversations. Vivian Korthius shared a picture from her office at Joe Lomack in Bethel. There's usually a lot of fishermen in front of Bethel, but this picture had 2 boats, so it doesn't look like that today. I'm hopeful the numbers stay down so that the Feds have an opportunity to allow more fishing if the numbers look good. ADF&G has come out with their numbers. The numbers for kings don't look significantly better, or for chums, but for reds, there is an uptick.

- **Adolph Lupie – Tuntutuliak:** When you're talking about 60 years from now, when we're gone. Our forefathers went through the starvations, and they mentioned that it takes maybe 100 years. Further down the generations, there'll be another starvation which is more hardship than the cold 19[?]. When that's coming, all the wild animals from upriver will be coming down toward the coast. For the past few years, there's been wild animals coming down. Grizzly bears; we didn't have lots of moose but there's moose now. When we're done, even today, I feel glad that I'm extending the Kuskokwim River to all generations before they have a hardship of starvation. Sixty-five thousand for the State, it sounds good, but 110,000 is far better. With that 65,000 there'll be less salmon going upriver or no more salmon. Quyana, Mary and Steven!
- **Boyd Blihovde – USFWS/YDNWR:** I appreciate the comments that Steven and Adolph both made. I think it comes back down to what's right. Everybody has to do what they feel is right. I try to do that every day. I know what's right for me, and Steven and others know what's right for your family and yourselves. Here at USFWS we're going to continue to do what's right for the people and the salmon. That's part of our mission and managing this resource. That's all I can do: promise that we're going to try to do the right thing. We can't control what other people do, but we're going to try to have good relationships and partner with people. I agree, Steven, the restrictions have been tough. It's been hard on the people that live here. And I agree that there's more to it. The salmon continue to decline for things beyond our control that we need to start looking into. KRITFC has started to do that by getting involved with Bering Sea issues. When the season's over for salmon, that doesn't mean we forget about salmon. And especially conservation of salmon and trying to promote them even after the season has stopped. That's what I hope we can do this coming fall, winter, and into next year.
- **Mary Peltola – KRITFC:** Thank you, Boyd. I think that might be a good place to end our call today. Please call again next Monday! Thanks, everybody.