

**Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission
Weekly River-Wide Teleconference
Monday, June 7, 2021 | 10am AKDT**

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

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

Meeting ID: 569 490 3415

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.

Hosts on this call:

Kevin Whitworth, Fisheries Biologist, KRITFC

Boyd Blihovde, Manager, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge

People on this call: 12

Summary:

- The Kuskokwim is still experiencing high water throughout much of the middle and lower river, and not all of the snow in the mountains has melted. A king salmon was caught in Red Devil. Monarch butterflies have appeared in the headwaters, and local knowledge says king salmon arrive with monarchs. Cold temperatures and southwest winds in the lower river might mean this could be a good year for king salmon.
- Salmon harvest estimates produced by ONC, KRITFC, and USFWS from the first 2 set net opportunities are:
 - June 2: 23 interviews, 29 set nets counted from Tuntutuliak to Akiak, total of 30 salmon (30 kings).
 - June 5: 38 interviews, 91 set nets counted from Tuntutuliak to Akiak, total of 380 salmon (310 Chinook).
- ONC has conducted surveys at the Bethel boat harbor and Bethel area fish camps. Those surveyed have given comments about opener duration, net length restrictions, and concern or lack thereof about which entity is managing the fishery. ONC will provide a full list of comments at the June 9 ADF&G Working Group meeting.
- Bethel Test Fish and Aniak Test Fish have just begun. BTF has caught a few kings, and ATF has caught no kings.
- USFWS law enforcement is on the river. The Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge will work to communicate the 100-yard mark at salmon spawning tributaries to avoid future citations.

- Salmon runs around the state are poor this year. The Anchor River and Deep Creek near Homer are closed to angling. The Copper River is experiencing a perhaps historically low sockeye return. The Yukon fishery is affected by trawling in the Bering Seas, according to a caller from Emmonak, as are other rivers around the state.
- A caller from Napaskiak suggested making the net length regulation 75 feet instead of 60 feet; translating opportunity information to Yugtun; changing the time of this teleconference to avoid time conflict with KYUK's Yuk to Yuk; and installing the ADF&G sonar earlier in the season.
- King salmon harvest permits are available in state waters to harvest 10 kings per household.

Full Notes:

- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Let's go ahead and get started. June 1 to the 11 is the early season closure dates. Since then, we've had a couple set net openers. They've been preannounced by USFWS staff. June 2, 5, and 9 are the set net openers from 6:00am to 10:00pm. To share a little bit, we were able to do a harvest estimate for June 2, produced by ONC, KRITFC, and USFWS. On June 2, there were 23 total interviews conducted and a total of 30 salmon harvested from Tuntutuliak to Akiak. It was cold that day, high water down in the Tuntutuliak area, so there were not a lot of people fishing that day. On June 5, there were another 38 interviews, 91 set nets were observed by USFWS aerial surveys, and 380 salmon total were harvested: 310 Chinook, 20 chum, and about 50 sockeye. So, a little bit more effort that day. USFWS saw a few more boats on this second opener. These estimates are between Tuntutuliak and Akiak. A reminder that June 9 is our third set net opener from 6:00am to 10:00pm. I don't know of any other assessment data. I know Bethel Test Fish has started, they have caught a few fish, but not that many. Same with Aniak Test Fish; they just started there and I don't know that they've caught many fish. Boyd, do you have any comments? And then we can get into other questions and comments.
- **Boyd Blihovde, USFWS/YDNWR:** You covered it pretty well with 29 boats on that first aerial survey and 91 this past Saturday. That sounds pretty much like normal with it being a weekend and getting closer to good salmon season. I appreciate it.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Any comments or questions from the public, or staff, or anybody? I heard in Red Devil that somebody caught a king there. I don't know of any others past there, but this means the fish are moving up the river. This weekend, I saw my first monarch butterfly, and the local people say that's when the king salmon start to arrive, when you see the monarchs. They fish are here – just the frontiers, I would say. Another reminder that Wednesday at 10am is the next in-season Working Group meeting hosted by ADF&G.
- **Katie Russell, ONC:** I can share some updates from the surveys ONC has been doing and comments from the fishers. ONC technicians and Danielle Lowrey, the ONC fisheries biologist along with me, were able to be at the Bethel boat harbor and fish camps to do surveys. On June 2, we surveyed 1 Bethel area fish camp, and on June 5, we surveyed 5. We talked with more people at fish camps but not everyone had started fishing; some people were just getting their fish camps ready and preparing for the next openers and drift openers. At the Bethel boat harbor, on June 2, we were able to conduct 14 interviews, and on June 5, we conducted 15 interviews. Those were just for salmon harvests. We also did a couple interviews where people were just harvesting whitefish; those were not included in the harvest estimates that Kevin was just sharing about because those estimates are just for salmon right now. But there were a few people who caught some whitefish in their set nets, and 1 or 2 people who caught some sheefish as well. A lot of the comments we heard from people were that they want the river to be open all summer and nets to be longer. A couple people mentioned that the opener was

too early, and other people mentioned that the second week of June is better for Chinook fishing. We also did hear at least 1 or 2 concerns about commercial fishing depleting Chinook in the river. There were also some comments that people didn't care if the federal or state government was managing; they just wanted to fish legally. There were another couple comments about not caring about management, and then some more comments about wanting longer net lengths and longer openers. We'll share a full report at the Working Group meeting on Wednesday with these comments written up. But, in general, it seemed like there were not that many people at the Bethel boat harbor and fish camps; very few people were catching more than 1 king in their set nets. Hopefully fishing will pick up and people will catch more soon. If anyone has questions, let Danielle or I know.

- **Boyd Blihovde, USFWS/YDNWR:** Law enforcement is out, and they've made some cases. They've seen some folks with confusion about where the non-salmon spawning tributaries are located and where they start. We're working on getting those better marked with stakes 100 yards in from the mouth of those tributaries. We're trying to work on some maps we can distribute as well. We're hoping to work with KRITFC about getting those maps out on social media and in boat harbors. Just wanted to make sure everybody knew. It can be really confusing. Every year, it can be hard to tell where the 100-yard mark starts. We're especially trying to get that going before the drift net opportunities start on June 12.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you, Boyd, a good reminder. And the first drift net opportunity is June 12, from 6:00am to 6:00pm. Boyd, have you heard anything on the Yukon? I know folks like to compare the Kusko to the Yukon. Have you heard how that fishery is going so far?
- **Boyd Blihovde, USFWS/YDNWR:** Yeah, I just heard bits and pieces. They seem to be a bit behind, which I guess is pretty normal. Where we have seen some salmon further upstream – where folks have caught some going up your way, Kevin – they've got fewer observations of salmon. I'm out in the field right now, but before I left last week, I hadn't heard of any salmon being observed yet. Maybe that's changed now. They do have the river closed fairly similarly to us, but as far as I've heard, they don't have any openers announced yet. It's just closed. They were getting their monitoring sites, like their sonar sites at the mouth, set up.
- **Terese Schomogyi, KRITFC:** One other thing that's happening today, if folks have time, at 11am there's a listening session coordinated by AFN about the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. This Act was passed back in the 1970s, and it's the piece of legislation that created the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. It's up for reauthorization I think this year. That call-in is a listening session with Congressmen Young (R-AK) and Huffman (D-CA). It's a good chance for Tribes to call in and ask for Tribal seats on NPFMC, among other things, so those can be included when the MSA is reauthorized. If folks are interested in calling in, it's at 11am, and the information is on our Facebook page, @KuskoSalmon.
- **Boyd Blihovde, USFWS/YDNWR:** Just one other thing for folks doing community-based harvest monitoring. It sounds like there's a lot of comments that go along with their data, whether it's complaints or suggestions. It might be good for folks doing the monitoring to give this call-in information out, if they don't already do it. They can talk with us that way. I know this is a public call, so it might be a good way for us to hear from them.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thanks for that. It sounds like so far, fishing is just getting started, and folks are still getting their camps ready, and the fish are just trickling in.
- **LaMont Albertson, KRITFC:** I haven't heard anything about the Nushagak other than what we've already heard about the Kuskokwim. I'm trying to think; they've closed the Anchor River around

Homer, and the Deep Creek down there also. There's no angling whatsoever allowed down there. Other than that, I haven't heard anything.

- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Yes. And Jim might be able to share something about the Copper River, I heard they're closing down the fishery there.
- **Jim Simon, KRITFC:** The Copper River is experiencing some of the poorest production so far as of last week. It's picked up some over the weekend, but they're looking at historically low sockeye returns. The managers there are hopefully optimistic that it's a late run. They did suggest that the water is too cold for the salmon to come into the river, which is opposite of the Traditional Knowledge of the Ahtna people and what I've heard elsewhere from Native people in Alaska. There is some ongoing discussions between the Tribes and the Ahtna Inter-Tribal Resource Commission with the National Park Service. That's all within NPS waters, but there's never been any federal action on that river. The Cheesh'na Tribal Council is interested in federal action to close non-federal subsistence uses. AITRC is planning on a personal use dipnet fishery opening later this week. It is reduced from the normal schedule, but there's a lot of concerns about them intercepting concerns that are heading toward the uppermost portions of the river. The Ahtna people are really looking and learning a lot from KRITFC's experience over these recent years and helping to promote Tribal needs and conservation concerns as well as a continuation of subsistence uses, based on a lot of what KRITFC is educating the rest of the state about. So, it's not looking good there, either.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you, Jim. Did you hear how the king salmon run is doing on the Copper River this year?
- **Jim Simon, KRITFC:** I am not as up to speed on king salmon run because we've been focusing on the sockeye salmon. But the Chinook salmon escapement goal was not met last year; the sockeye goal was barely met; and the uppermost Tribes, as probably sounds familiar to you in McGrath, are really not getting fish to their portions of the river, as well as Katie John's traditional fish camp. Last year, some of those Tribes had to buy salmon. So, really, the 100,000 to 150,000 non-subsistence dipnet fishery below river is having a large conservation effect on the river and on federal subsistence uses. I mentioned that the king salmon goal was not met last year, and this year looks worse so far. Last year, ADF&G's preseason forecast did not pan out, as is not a surprise, perhaps. The actual return was 924,000 fish fewer than what they expected to return. That's sockeye numbers. The king numbers were also below the prediction, if I recall correctly.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you, Jim. Any other comments or questions? Sounds like we're reaching out to all the places in the state; anything else for the Kuskokwim?
- **Jim Simon, KRITFC:** I have a question for the gentleman calling in from Emmonak; he may have some interesting observations on the Yukon, if he might be interested in sharing that with us?
- **Fisher from Emmonak:** I do have a comment, because we were really affected in 1998 by trawlers out in the Bering Sea. We have never been able to harvest or commercial fish for king salmon ever since. What's happening could be affecting other communities in Alaska, because of the effects of trawling in the Bering Sea. I don't think that's only trawlers up there; there's long-liners, many different processors out there. But their catch greatly affects us from headwaters down to here. I believe we have miners, loggers, dams upriver in Canada. We need to look into that all over the state, and figure out what is happening out in the Bering Sea and how it's really affecting us. I just wanted to make that comment because we are economically and socially affected. It's not only here, it's all over up and down the Yukon River. We have depended on the king salmon ever since I was a child – all the rivers, north, middle, and south, and all the other types of rivers and creeks that come in. Salmon was just

everywhere. Something has to be done. I've been advocating for that for a long time with the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association and all those meetings. Nothing seems to be happening. I think we need to look into those Bering Sea trawlers and in other areas. Just my comment, thank you for having me on.

- **Jim Simon, KRITFC:** Thank you very much for sharing your concerns. Not only do I work for KRITFC, but I'm also involved with YRITFC. At their meeting a couple weeks ago, there was a lot of discussions and concerns about what's happening in the Bering Sea and high seas. I think Terese will provide some information for a call coming up in just half an hour where you might be able to participate to share those concerns with Congressmen Young and Huffman.
- **Terese Schomogyi, KRITFC:** I have the numbers and I can share them with you right now! The toll-free number to call is 1-253-215-8782. The meeting ID is 921 5767 1266 and the passcode is 541865. If you punch in all those at 11am, there's the listening session, and AFN is coordinating that. Quiana for calling in!
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you for calling in from the lower Yukon. I see someone else dialed in; do you have any questions or comments for federal managers or KRITFC?
- **Steven Alexie, Napaskiak:** Yeah, just a suggestion, and maybe an adjustment. All these years since 2014, we've been fishing with 150-foot gear and 60 feet. The majority of us cannot afford to buy 60 feet, so we end up using half our net or less than that. If you guys can make an adjustment to 75 feet, we'd appreciate it. That way none of us will have a citation for trying to have a taste of our kings and trying to live our life. And then a majority of those living in the villages have limited English. If they could transcribe all of these into Yup'ik, too. Like my uncle, he didn't graduate high school, he doesn't speak much English. It needs to pass on more when there's going to be openings. He had set a full net, 150 foot, and he got fined \$400. I think we're going to have a good king year because this cold weather keeps happening with southwest winds. My late grandfather used to say that these southwest winds in the Kuskokwim area brings in fish. I wouldn't be surprised if we meet or exceed our escapement goals.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you very much, Steven, those are great comments. I do think you can legally tie your net at 60 feet and use your longer net, as long as it's tied up and you don't use the full net. Is that correct, Boyd?
- **Steven Alexie, Napaskiak:** What I'm trying to say is that when it's drift time, we use 150 feet. And then you guys' legal gear is 60 feet, can be tied up to 100 feet from the banks. It probably is possible, but when you're getting prepared, I always prepare my net to half of 150 feet; that's 75 feet. If those 60 feet can be adjusted to 75 feet, 6-inch, and 45 meshes, that would be a little bit easier for those who cannot afford to buy 60-foot pre-hung net. And then probably your meeting on Monday is usually during Yuk to Yuk on KYUK. Maybe you guys should move it to some other date. I was just listening to Yuk to Yuk and I remembered you guys have meetings every Monday.
- **Boyd Blihovde, USFWS/YDNWR:** I think Mr. Alexie is making a really good point about the net length. I'll make a note of it and we can certainly consider that for next year. It may be too late for this year because the changes already came out. It's a good point though; much easier just to take half of your net and put it out instead of trying to measure 60 feet.
- **Steven Alexie, Napaskiak:** And I think for the first time, I had a pleasant encounter with state troopers where they weren't very hostile. They were listening. I asked instead of the first year we had this closure, Akiak had a vile situation with USFWS trooper where they cut up their net. The troopers did give me an okay to set your net at half a net. It was very pleasant for the first time. I think there will be

more participants on the call if you move it, because right now from 10 to 11:30am, it's Yuk to Yuk, and the majority of those people are listening in to Yuk to Yuk.

- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you, Steven, that's a very good comment. I'll pass that along to our executive director, Mary Peltola, about the time conflict with the other call-in show that's happening right now.
- **Steven Alexie, Napaskiak:** How are the test fisheries looking right now?
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** They just started BTF last week; I haven't seen an assessment update, all I've heard is an update from the Working Group meeting last week. They caught a few king salmon, that's all I've heard. I don't know if the sonar is in yet, but it should be soon.
- **LaMont Albertson, KRITFC:** I don't have any report to give there other than the fact that it's something like it was last year, which is not good.
- **Steven Alexie, Napaskiak:** That first opener, I did catch a very big broad back whitefish with my 6-inch gear. It was a pleasant catch, we had a good meal out of it. The numbers from the harvest surveys are pretty good; it's looking good so far. Maybe one other suggestion too – is ADF&G online? Maybe you guys can pass this onto them. When they set up their sonar – and I know it's fairly new – but they should set it up a few more weeks before fish actually start coming in because with high levels of water, I'm pretty sure they're going to be adjusting those sonars to try to catch the right numbers. This high water is not going to go away soon because there's been a lot of snow in the mountains that is running off. We haven't had this kind of high water since maybe 2009 or 2010, around there.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Steven, I will relay those comments to ADF&G. I'm in contact with Sean Larson quite often. As far as the water level goes, there is a lot of snow still up in the Alaska Range. A friend of mine flew into McGrath not too long ago and he said there still is lots of water to come down. He says it should be soon; once the Alaska Range starts to warm up, it'll come up a lot more. It did start to come down a lot here in McGrath.
- **Steven Alexie, Napaskiak:** One other note, you know, high water means there are a lot of predatory fish coming out of these small lakes, going over those beaver dams. A lot of pikes are probably coming out of these lakes due to this high water. That's one thing we need to start watching out for. I've caught sheefish that have small smolts in their stomachs.
- **Boyd Blihovde, USFWS/YDNWR:** Just on the high water comment, I can attest to it being really high on the Kisaralik and Kasigluk last weekend. Last weekend, it was flooded everywhere, over the banks, even halfway up from the Kuskokwim mouth from there to the mountains. I think it's still got a ways to go before it comes down. It's still cold and cloudy and rainy, so maybe it will be a good season for salmon like Mr. Alexie was saying.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you, Boyd, and that brings up a concern with the Kwethluk River weir. With the high water we're not able to install it; usually it's installed by now, and we just wait until the fish arrive. Since the water's been so high, we haven't been able to install it. It's a project run by USFWS, KRITFC, and OVK. It is a concern that the Kwethluk River weir won't be installed this year if we keep having high water like this.
- **LaMont Albertson, KRITFC:** I was thinking: are we going to have a meeting on June 10? I just think that Mr. Alexie might want to know the information we're going to give out after the set net opportunity on June 9, and I was wondering how he could get the information after that.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Got it. By June 14, we'll have a lot more information. The June 9 opener will have a harvest estimate by the 10, but I don't know that there's a public meeting where we could

present it. I did jot down Steven's number, and I could call him and see if he wants that info, and I could get his info.

- **LaMont Albertson, KRITFC:** I know we'll have that information here at the KRITFC office also, and we'll be glad to share that data. Thanks, Kevin.
- **Terese Schomogyi, KRITFC:** Also, on June 10, is KYUK's Fish Talk at 1pm. I don't know if our harvest estimates are ready that quickly – that's less than a 24-hour turnaround – but if there's any information, I'm sure Mary would be able to share it if she's hosting, or Boyd or Spencer or Aaron from USFWS. They're usually on that call, too.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Thank you, Terese. Our harvest estimates are happening a little bit quicker than last year. Yesterday, we produced it around 1pm or so. It might be ready. I'll get that to you, Terese, as soon as it's produced, and maybe we can get it on Fish Talk. Any more comments or questions? I see another number dialed in.
- **Dan Gillikin, Native Village of Napaimute:** Good morning, this is Dan Gillikin. I can give an update about the Aniak Test Fishery. They've been fishing every day, twice a day, 3 drifts per session. So far, they're catching nothing but water and sticks. The water is really high up here, like everyone's mentioned, so that's probably having an effect on the efficiency. I did hear they caught king salmon all the way up as far as Red Devil. They're going by, we just haven't picked any up in the test fishery yet. Could be any day now. I also want to remind everybody, at least in the middle and upper river, that the ADF&G Chinook salmon permits are now available. There was a bit of a delay getting them out into the villages, but I believe they all got mailed or sent out. We do have permits available, and that goes into effect on June 12. People can fish with those permits and get 10 Chinook salmon per household if they choose to. And the Salmon River weir crews are probably going to go up on Wednesday and start staging stuff at the weir and evaluate that and see how the water levels are. I suspect they're probably still too high to get the weir in, but we have a little more flexibility with that. It's not nearly as tough as the Kwethluk; you guys are going to have your work cut out for you this year, I think.
- **Kevin Whitworth, KRITFC:** Any other comments or questions? If not, we can wrap it up. Thanks everyone for calling in, and we'll see you next week!