



KUSKOKWIM RIVER

INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION

OUR RIVER, OUR PEOPLE, OUR FISH

P.O. Box 190 Bethel, AK 99559-190 | Phone: (907) 543-4524 | Email: info@kritfc.org

Summary to the WIRAC | Spring Meeting 2021

I. Personnel/Staff Update

The Fish Commission is holding its Annual Meeting on April 7 & 8. Our 2020 Annual Meeting was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, so this is our first Annual Meeting since 2019. There will be changes to Commissioners, Executive Council representatives, Officers and In-Season Managers after this meeting.

Staff at the Fish Commission have had no changes since the fall:

- Mary Peltola, Executive Director
- Kevin Whitworth, Fish Biologist
- Casey Rangel, Executive Administrator
- Terese Schomogyi, Jesuit/AmeriCorps Volunteer, Communications & Outreach

In 2021, the Fish Commission will also be operating with 638 Tribal Compact Status for the first season. We achieved this late last year, and it means we are stepping away from Bering Sea Fishermen's Association (BSFA) as our fiscal agent and the Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) as our fiscal sponsor so we can be financially independent as a Tribal agency.

II. 2021 Project Updates/Summary

In 2021, the Fish Commission is planning to implement the following projects:

A. Community-Based Harvest Monitoring (CBHM)

The CBHM program is one of the Fish Commission's most important programs because it provides an immediate in-season index of salmon run strength, run timing, and community harvest data. Our In-Season Managers rely heavily on this data before Bethel Test Fish and Bethel Sonar data comes in, which typically is not until around June 12. In recent years, specifically 2019 and 2020, when preseason run forecasts have been 50-100% inaccurate, CBHM data has been even more critical for in-season management of the Kuskokwim salmon fishery. The CBHM program also helps develop local community capacities, as the Fish Commission employs local community members, generally youth, as harvest monitors.

The 2021 season will be the fifth year the Fish Commission has been involved in operating the CBHM program. Where, when, and with whom the CBHM program will be run in 2021 is dependent on COVID-19 restrictions on village travel and community interaction in the Kuskokwim region. Last year, the Fish Commission was able to recruit harvest monitors and enact the program in 4 middle river villages. We hope to do at least that much this year, but it is dependent on the reach of the pandemic.



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B. Takotna River Weir

The Takotna River weir is an important Kuskokwim headwaters Chinook and chum salmon run index the Fish Commission operates. The weir is located 2 miles outside of the village of Takotna, and local residents from Takotna are hired to install and operate the weir throughout the season. 2021 will be the Fish Commission's fifth season funding and overseeing the Takotna River weir in partnership with the Takotna Village Council and Fish and Game. Like the CBHM program, Takotna River weir operation in the upcoming season is dependent on COVID-19 restrictions; however, the Fish Commission did manage to operate this project for some of the 2020 season, despite the pandemic and high waters. We are hopeful we will be able to do the same in 2021.

C. Kwethluk River Weir

The Fish Commission plans to assist in the Kwethluk River weir with the Organized Village of Kwethluk (OVK) and Fish and Wildlife Service. The Kwethluk River is the second most productive tributary in the Kuskokwim drainage basin, so this weir is another critical index for salmon monitoring and management. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, it is unclear if the weir will be operational in 2021.

III. 2021 Kuskokwim River Salmon Management and Harvest Strategies

Fish Commission Staff, Executive Council members, and In-Season Managers have been working with staff at the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) since the fall to draft a joint 2021 Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Strategy. We collectively decided that a joint Management Strategy would bring us back to our Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which the Fish Commission and the Refuge signed in 2016 promising to be fishery management partners. We each have strayed from the purpose of the MOU in recent years but are re-dedicated to collaborating in the 2021 season and onward as we come together at the management table with other stakeholders.

Our joint 2021 Management Strategy lays out a broad view of how the Fish Commission and the Refuge are approaching the Kuskokwim River salmon fishery in the upcoming season. Its key points include:

- The Fish Commission and Refuge will take a precautionary, conservative-based approach to salmon harvest management in order to avoid collective overharvest and rebuild Chinook salmon populations. This approach takes into account multiple risk factors and uncertainties associated with Kuskokwim salmon management. It also addresses the Kuskokwim as a mixed stock fishery in which Chinook, chum, and sockeye salmon run at overlapping times from mid-June to mid-July, meaning that any action taken to protect or harvest Chinook salmon will invariably affect chum and sockeye salmon as well. This is not a new approach to Kuskokwim salmon management; the Refuge Federal in-season manager has approached salmon management in this way for at least the last 3 years.



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- We will prioritize in-season indicators of run strength and run timing over the pre-season forecast, which exhibits very high uncertainty.
- We will sustainably manage other currently healthy salmon populations in the Kuskokwim River watershed, knowing that salmon run times overlap in this mixed stock fishery. Additionally, we will be monitoring chum salmon numbers due to our concern that the poor chum salmon run in 2020 could repeat in 2021 and subsequent years.
- We will uphold fish conservation, fish diversity, and subsistence harvest mandates within the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) so that we can provide for sustained customary and traditional subsistence harvest now and in the future.
- We will use in-season subsistence harvest data from the CBHM program, other in-season run indexes, and local and traditional knowledge to assess the salmon runs and guide our in-season management.
- We will communicate to Federally qualified subsistence users along the Kuskokwim about the need for our conservative-based management approach.

Along with this 2021 Management Strategy, the Fish Commission and the Refuge will also collaboratively draft a 2021 Kuskokwim River Salmon Harvest Strategy, which will put the approach of the Management Strategy into time-specific goals for the 2021 season.

IV. Introduce Dr. Daniel Schindler and MSE Process

For several months now, the Fish Commission has been involved in a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) process with various Kuskokwim salmon stakeholders, including Orutsararmiut Native Council (ONC), Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) at the Refuge. The MSE process is a way for fishers, knowledge holders, researchers, and managers on the Kuskokwim to come together to find an agreeable management approach for protecting salmon and customary fishing in this river system.

The Fish Commission would like to give the remainder of its presentation time to Dr. Daniel Schindler, a salmon fishery and ecology researcher based in Seattle at the School of Aquatic Fisheries and Sciences at the University of Washington. He has been one of the principal leads of the MSE process and he is joining this Regional Advisory Council meeting to speak more about it.

Sincerely,

Mary Peltola
KRITFC, Executive Director