

Y-K residents hurt by poor chum salmon return get help from state

Governor Walter J. Hickel has announced a plan to bring immediate assistance to residents of the Kuskokwim and Lower Yukon Basin who are faced with an extremely poor chum salmon harvest.

The governor declared the chum harvest a disaster to seek federal assistance to provide relief and sent four cabinet officers to Bethel and villages in western Alaska to meet with local officials and develop an economic relief plan.

Highlights of the plan include:

- Expedite existing grants and loans for projects and programs that are planned for the region, thereby getting funds to the area sooner than originally scheduled;
- Conduct in-season management activities such as test fish-

eries on the Kuskokwim River to ensure full harvest opportunities for any available surplus coho salmon;

- Instruct state agencies with loan programs to extend payment schedules for affected Lower Yukon-Kuskokwim residents and work with private creditors toward the same goal;
- Inform area commercial fishermen of state loan programs that can replace the widespread practice of paying off boat, engine and gear purchases from the proceeds from the current year's fish harvest;
- Assess the ability of the state to provide fuel assistance that will enable local residents to conduct subsistence hunting activities this fall and winter, and expedite energy assistance

decisions which would provide cash for winter energy needs;

- Increase, wherever possible, active communication between fish managers and users prior to the implementation of resource management decisions;
- Work with Rural CAP and the Association of Village Council Presidents to identify and provide assistance to the neediest families impacted;
- Delegate a state government representative to identify and coordinate all available aid program from local, state, and federal agencies, as well as other appropriate organizations, and report weekly to the Governor.

"I was disappointed to learn that many affected residents are

not aware of programs that could be helping them now," Hickel said. "The visits and public meetings held in Bethel and Saint Mary's helped to identify immediate actions we can take to provide this area with much-needed relief."

Hickel has appointed Edgar Blatchford, commissioner of community and regional affairs, to head a task force to develop long term solutions to what has become a pattern of ever-declining chum returns to both rivers.

The task force will address the need for increased information on near and far-shore chum salmon migration, adding value to existing fisheries by increasing access to funds enabling the purchase of ice and filleting equipment, increased monitoring of chum, coho, and chinook escapement, and investigation of diversified commer-

cial fisheries to include underexploited species.

The task force will include local and state members, as well as others from regional Community Development Quota programs from the affected areas, and is to have its work completed by mid-December so that legislation designed to address these and other issues can be drafted for the next legislative session, Hickel said.

In recent weeks, some of the initial restrictions on subsistence salmon fishing have been eased, marking the end of the chum run and the beginning of a reportedly healthy run of silver salmon.

In addition to state cabinet members, Gov. Hickel himself recently completed a tour of the several Yukon and Kuskokwim River villages.