
Allows Indians To Fish

COPPER CENTER (Special)
The Copper River Indians have won their "fishing war" with Fish and Game authorities.

But it was the fish themselves—red salmon on an early run in the Copper River—that settled the dispute.

State officials this week were able to back down gracefully from a showdown with irate Indian fishermen over what the Indians called their aboriginal right to use fish-wheels and nets on the river in the early salmon run.

Game authorities earlier said they would enforce a new regulation that prohibited wheels and nets before June 15, as a "conservation measure."

Indian leaders in Copper Center protested the rule to Gov. William Egan, but Egan declined to rescind the rule.

"He turned us down flat,"

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Rescinds . . .

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Markel Ewan, vice president of the Copper River Indian Council said,

Ewan said the 500 Copper River Indians would have started fishing anyway June 1, "as we have done for centuries."

If necessary, he said, each fisherman would catch a fish, turn it over to Fish & Game officers, and demand to be arrested.

A similar maneuver was staged a few years ago by protesting Eskimo hunters at Point Barrow. In that case, state officials had passed a ruling against the taking of eider ducks by Barrow people for subsistence.

Game officers at Barrow were confronted by lines of hunters, each with a duck and a request to be jailed, as provided in the ruling.

As the June 1 deadline neared on the Copper River, authorities changed their minds and said they would allow subsistence fishing to begin June 1, because of, they said, an unusually heavy early run of salmon in the Copper River.

Game biologists said that it appears the 1966 salmon catch will exceed the 807,000 fish taken last year.

Ralph Pirtle, area management biologist with the Fish and Game Department, said the 400-odd fishing boats in the early run on the river have been taking up to 300 fish per three and a half day fishing period.

This year's boat-fishing season on the Copper River opened May 16, and already 376,000 reds have been taken in the first two weeks—a gain of 100,000 over the yearly amounts for five years.

Mainly 5 to 6 year old fish were being taken in the run, Pirtle said, with an average weight of 6.2 pounds each.

But because of the strong early run, Game authorities decided to let the Copper River Indians start fishing June 1.

Before the back-track by the state, officers of the Copper River Indian Council had put out a plea for help from Native associations around the state, to aid them in their protest.

The oil-rich Tyonek Indians pledged what financial and moral support they could, and Stanley McClutcheon, Anchorage attorney representing the Tyoneks, was ready to move into court with the Copper River Indians.