

Middle Yukon villages angered by fishing limits

by Jeff Richardson

Village residents along the middle Yukon River are angered by an economic crisis stemming from severe restrictions on chum salmon harvests. In Kaltag, commercial fishing limits have left a growing number of residents short of funds to pay electric bills and other basic living expenses.

Even when chum runs are light, the middle Yukon usually sees 5-8 days of commercial fishing for chum roe. This year, there was one 12-hour opening and one 9-hour opening. Despite higher roe prices, most fishermen are averaging an estimated \$2,000 for the season, less than half of what they've been making in recent years.

With the loss of income, subsistence fishing is even more important than usual, but even these harvests have been restricted this summer, prompting concerns about village food supplies.

To make the situation even more frustrating, Kaltag residents contend there have actually been more chums than reported by the Alaska Dept. of Fish and Game

(ADFG) and that while their harvest has been cut dramatically, incidental catch of chums both up and downstream by villages targeting other species has continued.

While the run had a slow start, said Richard Burnham, a Kaltag fisherman, after July 4 "the fish just started pouring in."

"People are saying 'They're catching chums below us and above us. Why is fish and game telling us we can't catch chums at all?'" said Burnham. "This is the only fishery we have. When we have a disaster on summer chums, that's it for us."

Burnham said Kaltag is a willing party to a four-year-old conservation plan for the fishery, but has long-standing concerns about the state's ability to produce reliable data to carry out the plan's objectives. Local fishermen contend that extrapolations based on data from aerial surveys are faulty

because overcast, overhanging vegetation and only sporadic flights make state estimates highly suspect.

In fact, Kaltag developed its own fish counting program, with
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western Alaskan salmon. All told, as the Aleutian and Kodiak area fishermen increase their effort and efficiency in catches of all salmon, the return of several of these wild salmon stocks to western Alaska is dropping drastically, so much so that severe restrictions and closures were implemented throughout all of western Alaska. They are putting at risk the subsistence and commercial fisheries of about 100,000 western and interior Alaskans to benefit 300 commercial fishing permit holders at Area M.

On the Kuskokwim, a complete salmon subsistence closure went into effect for the very first time in July. On the Yukon a complete commercial fishing closure and severe subsistence restrictions are now in effect on failed fall chum salmon. This is after fishing closures due to drastically low returns of summer chum salmon. The Yukon River fisheries have been on a severe decline for more than ten years. The fish are simply not showing up and are virtually disappearing. More of the same

has happened this year in both the Norton Sound and Kotzebue Sound areas where weak returns of chum salmon have shut down subsistence and commercial fisheries again for several years in a row.

Kuskokwim subsistence and commercial fishermen have seen the impact of record catches of migrating coho salmon in the Area M fishery. Based on past ADF&G commercial fisheries catch reports, and run timing data, the majority of these migrating coho salmon are bound for the Kuskokwim. At the beginning of the season on the Kuskokwim, coho salmon were returning in strong numbers. Three weeks before, a closure in the Area M fishery was in effect. But three weeks after the Area M fishery reopened and reported record catches of coho, the return to the Kuskokwim dropped.

This same pattern has been seen in previous years. In Bristol Bay, coho salmon returns are so low that a total subsistence closure has been put in place there. Kuskokwim fishermen fear the

same decimation of coho salmon by Area M fishermen as they target the high valued coho.

ADF&G continues to state that the Area M Fishery is not the cause of the salmon crash. They fail to see however that it is a major contributing factor in the downfall of discrete wild salmon bound for western Alaska. The state seems poised and determined to manage the Area M fishery disregarding escapement and conservation of western Alaska salmon.

If this attitude and management style continues, wild salmon throughout all of western Alaska will eventually disappear completely. Western Alaskan chum and coho salmon will continue to be subject to unpredictable disruption, threatening sustained yield on certain stocks, including subsistence. 1993 has seen the widespread social and economic damage to all of western Alaska due to the salmon failure. Expectations are that the failure of

salmon returns will continue throughout the entire lifecycle of this years class of western Alaska salmon.

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Editor's Note: The views expressed by Myron Naneng are not necessarily those of the Tundra Times. If you are interested in submitting a commentary, please write to: Editor, Tundra Times, P.O. Box 92247, Anchorage, AK 99509