

Change in fish and game management sought

By Myron Naneng

The Alaska State Department of Fish and Game has a constitutional obligation to provide for sustained yield of salmon. But they continue to violate this obligation. Arctic Yukon Kuskokwim fishermen have long contended that salmon stocks bound for western Alaskan rivers are intercepted and the Area M fishery near False Pass. The Fish and Game biologists have documented that western Alaska salmon stocks exist and are unpredictably vulnerable in the Area M fishery. Although ocean conditions, competition for food between wild and hatchery salmon stocks, and other ecological and climatological conditions are contributing factors in the strength of a salmon run, the fishing gauntlet and expanding fishing power in Area M continues to decimate discrete salmon stocks bound for western Alaska.

State biologists have main-

tained that salmon exist in numbers to sustain a commercial harvest at False Pass. But AYK fishermen have real cause to question the credibility of the department when top level state biologists and board of fish employees are rewarded with high paying jobs by Area M fishing groups shortly after Board of Fisheries deliberations are made on the issue. Talk of collusion and collaboration have credibility when it is found that Area M fishing group proposals to the Board of Fisheries look suspiciously like the ADF&G's recommendations to the board. No independent at-sea verification program exists to examine rumors about discarding of chums by Area M fishermen ("chum chucking") and miscounting chums as reds in order to reduce the reported chum catch figures. With such a wide area to manage and order to reduce the reported chum catch figures. With such a wide area to manage and enforce, and because

of the contentiousness of the issue, this remains a valid concern.

During the June 1993 Area M fishery, an interception of 529,307 chum salmon were reported by ADF&G. Shortly afterwards, an already weak run of chum salmon crashed on the Kuskokwim and other western Alaska river systems. For the very first time on the Kuskokwim, escapement to the spawning grounds fell fourteen times below escapement goals. Commenting on the impact of a July 1993 by-catch of 48,000 chum salmon by Kodiak and Aleutian East Borough pollock fishermen, the ADF&G stated that they were not concerned and discredited the theory that the gulf pollock fishery by-catch could be responsible for the weak chum returns in the Kuskokwim or elsewhere.

Putting it simply, the state commercial fisheries biologists and managers are playing ostrich with the issue and Russian roulette with

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technical assistance from the University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service. The program trains and pays local students to man a counting tower near the village and is much more reliable than aerial surveys, Burnham said.

"We've been in a real conservation mode, (but) ADFG's lack of money has not allowed them to monitor the conservation efforts at all for the last four years," said Burnham.

State Rep. Georgianna Lincoln flew from a Friday meeting with about 400 Cordova fishermen to meet with Kaltag residents on Saturday. In addition to concerns about the state's ability to count fish, they vented other frustrations.

"They have case after case of

being harassed while they're trying to fish. They feel there's no management, period," Lincoln told the *Tundra Times*.

While rumors that a task force would be appointed to investigate fishing troubles along the Yukon and elsewhere appear to be true, an announcement has yet to be made. Lincoln, who represents a huge portion of the state that includes most of the crisis areas, said she has not been consulted about formation of the group and is concerned that no one with local expertise will be appointed.

In addition to local concerns about ADFG, Burnham noted that management problems may extend far beyond the middle Yukon to all of western Alaska.