

Suit stems from desire to protect salmon

by Bob Aloysius

Yukon/Kuskokwim Fisheries Task Force

BETHEL — Several weeks ago, Hubert McCallum wrote to several newspapers, complaining about efforts by the poorest fishermen in the state to stop the interception of their salmon.

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McCallum sought to alarm every salmon fisherman in Alaska to defend the intercept fisheries against our court challenge.

The fishermen McCallum complains about live in the state's most economically depressed region with the highest unemployment rates. The salmon they are concerned about are being intercepted by the state's richest fishermen who fish in the False Pass and Alaska Peninsula area.

As chairman of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Fisheries Task Force, which is made up of several diverse fishing organizations in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, I am responding to McCallum's letter in an effort to tell the public and fishermen of Alaska they are being asked to get involved in an inter-regional issue.

The lawsuit by the Yukon-Kuskokwim Fisheries Task Force is between the State of Alaska's protection of intercept fishing in False Pass and the Peninsula, and the intercepted fishermen of Western Alaska. There is no fallout for other fisheries.

McCallum failed to mention that the False Pass and Peninsula fisheries opened this period of litigation last year by unsuccessfully challenging the right of the state to set an upper limit on the interception of chum salmon.

It appears that the False Pass and Peninsula fishermen are worried that their unrestricted habit of harvesting every other region's salmon may be in danger.

The salmon tagging study McCallum referred to demonstrated that salmon migrating through False Pass and the Peninsula were migrating to terminal stream areas in Western Alaska, Canada, the Soviet Union and Japan. The study also showed that the majority of the salmon were destined for Bristol Bay (30 percent) and the Kuskokwim River (33 percent).

We, the Yukon and Kuskokwim salmon fishermen, live and fish on terminal streams. Salmon fishing is our only economy. There are no other economic opportunities where we live.

We do not have shore-based groundfish fisheries or other year-round fishery related industry opportunities. We do not have oil, gas, mining or timber harvesting opportunities.

The vast majority of our local fishermen, including myself, are Alaska Natives, born and raised in the state, who will continue to live in our home villages throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

Fishing has been, is now and will always be our way of life. Because of this we are always involved in ways to preserve and maintain the fisheries that have always fed and will continue to feed us.

We are paid the lowest amount in the state for our fish because of the remoteness and the inconsistent run strengths of our salmon.

Since we never know how many of our chum or silver salmon are going to be intercepted in False Pass and the Peninsula, neither processors nor bankers have been willing to invest in our fishery. For these reasons we are the lowest paid fishermen in Alaska.

Because of our commitment to preserve and maintain our one economic base, we also fight to protect the spawning and rearing areas for the salmon. We must keep our streams clean so that the salmon are able to reproduce and assure us future stocks for our continued livelihood.

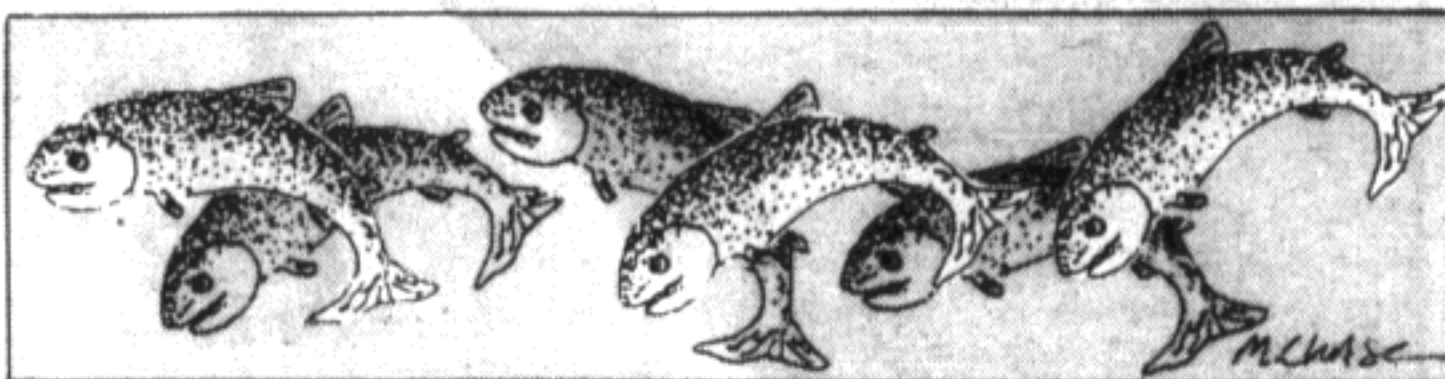
Our goal has been, is now and will continue to be to improve our fishery. Our concerned fishermen had to dig deep into their shallow pockets to fight the U.S. government and the Japanese fishing empire for 12 years to get Japan's salmon fleets out of U.S. waters.

Our small fisheries have been the state's leader in fighting the Asian squid fleets since 1980.

Due to our efforts, near normal salmon runs are returning to Alaska. Every fisherman in Alaska has benefited from our efforts. They are still benefitting from them, and they will continue to do so.

At the present time, the major obstacle for our salmon returning from the North Pacific Ocean to the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers is the unrestricted and very aggressive False Pass and Peninsula fishing fleets made

Our lawsuit is designed to make the state limit the False Pass and Peninsula fisheries to their own local stocks and stop intercepting everyone else's salmon. This is an issue every fisherman in the state can agree with.



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As salmon runs have improved, so has salmon interception by the False Pass and Peninsula fishing fleets. These are made up of highly effective and efficient gillnetters and purse seiners.

Our terminal stream commercial fisheries have had to be closed to make up for the loss of salmon due to the False Pass and Peninsula interceptions. Even on good run years, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game restricts us due to the uncertainty of how many of our salmon are being taken by the False Pass and Peninsula fleets.

Many times, our people had to sit and wait as our salmon swam by because the ADF&G personnel are not able to count fish in our muddy waters.

At times, the state has had to close our subsistence fisheries, but has allowed the False Pass and Peninsula fleets to continue fishing.

Our terminal stream fishermen must fish under strict and enforceable conservation and management rules and regulations. The False Pass and Peninsula fishermen are able to move around, at will, throughout their 600-mile unrestricted fishing zone.

The state allows the False Pass and Peninsula fishermen to fish on the capes in the Aleutian Island passes.

Salmon from throughout Alaska, migrating through these areas, school and mill around with local salmon during their migration to their respective spawning streams.

During this period, the non-local migrating salmon are easy prey for local fishermen.

If the migrating salmon are abundant anywhere in the 600-mile fishing zone, the False Pass and Peninsula fishing fleets are able to move at a moment's notice. They are able to use any amount of gear and go as far out to sea as they want. Under the state's rules, migrating salmon are not off limits to this kind of harvesting method.

The False Pass and Peninsula fishermen have made quite an economy for themselves. This economy has come out of the subsistence fish racks and wallets of the low-income terminal fishermen of the Kuskokwim and Yukon fisheries.

Our lawsuit is designed to make the state limit the False Pass and Peninsula fisheries to their own local stocks and stop intercepting everyone else's salmon. This is an issue every fisherman in the state can agree with.

For the benefit of all affected fishermen, subsistence and commercial, limiting the False Pass and Peninsula fisheries must become a reality and is long, long overdue.