

Holy Cross meeting on Yukon River salmon

by Patti Harper

for the Tundra Times

Most of the salmon caught on the mighty Yukon river are usually taken near its mouth as the fish begin their journey from the Bering Sea back to the streams they were born in. Nearly all of the 1 to 2 million salmon caught yearly along the river since 1974 have been taken by Alaskans. But, several of the most productive spawning grounds for those fish are two thousand miles from the mouth of the river, in Canada.

As fisheries in the Canadian Yukon grow, that country is claiming a right to benefit from Yukon river fish produced within its borders.

The recently signed bilateral salmon treaty between the United States and Canada left the Yukon River issue open, but mandated that the two sides initiate negotiations this year. Negotiators are scheduled to meet in October to begin the process of sorting out rights to Yukon river salmon.

At a meeting in Holy Cross, May 29th, about 40 representatives of fish and game advisory councils along the Yukon in Alaska, and members of the U.S. delegation, were briefed on the scientific data which will form the basis of discussions with Canada.

The available information does not ease the hearts and minds of Alaska fishermen.

"There's nothing in this (treaty negotiation) for Alaska fishermen except perhaps habitat measures to protect salmon spawning grounds, and pressure

to eliminate the high seas catch (of Yukon River salmon)," said Alaska Department of Fish and Game Northern Regional Supervisor Ron Regnart in an interview.

Regnart is part of a scientific working group from the two countries which issued a 64-page report in April on the status of the salmon stocks, fisheries, and management programs along the river. That report estimated that in 1982, 57.6 percent and in 1983, 46.5 percent of the chinook, or king salmon caught in Alaskan waters were Canadian kings.

These figures were developed through scale pattern analysis on some portions of the harvest. Samples were combined, and composition information for one part of the river was extrapolated to others based on a set of assumptions. Regnart doesn't have much confidence in some aspects of that statistical analysis, of which he said "You could almost flip a coin and do as good."

"I'm concerned about the data because it's a new approach to classification of these stocks. We can't verify the methodology," he said.

Still, he admits it's clear that Alaskan fishermen are taking a "substantial" number of Canadian kings, and a much smaller proportion of Canadian chums each year.

He thinks it's important to go slowly in determining which fish belong where, to avoid making a

mistake. "If we do (make a mistake), our fishermen are going to suffer for years and years," Regnart said.

The separate provision in the salmon treaty delaying settlement

of the Yukon river question gave U.S. fishermen time to push for what they want. They don't want to even begin discussing allocation of fish or other compensation to Canada until better data are

available on fish origin and until high seas interceptions of Yukon river salmon are stopped. They are particularly concerned about the interception of chinook by



Yukon River fishermen meet in Holy Cross to discuss the basis of the treaty with Canada.

photo by Patti Harper

Holy Cross

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Japanese fleets in the Bering Sea, and of chums by purseseiners in the Unimak-Shumagin Island fishery.

"If no fish come into the mouth of the river, where are the fish to negotiate about?" was the question of one representative at the Holy Cross meeting.

The Canadians seem ready to talk about numbers of fish. Their pressure for a quota and the interception threat to salmon stocks may have a hidden benefit, acting as catalysts unifying the historically divisive upriver and downriver Alaska fishermen.

But not before that division threatened to tear apart Alaska unity in negotiations with Canada.

Many fishermen at the Holy Cross meeting were irate at the independent action of one Native leader. William "Spud" Williams, president of the Native non-profit Tanana Chiefs Conference, announced in March that

he had signed an agreement with the Council of Yukon Indians supporting, among other things, 100 percent escapement of Canadian salmon for a period of five years. Total escapement of Canadian salmon would probably result in significant closures of fisheries in the Alaska portion of the river.

"At our last meeting, our delegation objected strenuously to that document," said Tony Vaska of Bethel, a member of the U.S. delegation.

A member of the Tanana Chiefs Conference Executive Board, Mitch Dementieff, told the group that they had taken a new position which, as he put it, "superseded" Williams' action. Dementieff said the TCC board has instead simply identified five points which they think should be considered in the negotiations: Japanese high seas interception of salmon stocks, the False-Pass-Shumagin Islands fishery interception of fall chum stocks bound for the Yukon River, the need for continued habitat protection of salmon spawning streams, continuation of subsistence

fishing along the Yukon river, and continuation of commercial fishing activities along the river.

Some observers credit Williams' action with indirectly forcing addition of representatives from the upper Yukon region in Alaska to the U.S. delegation.

But even fishermen from the Tanana Chiefs' region were angry at what they considered inappropriate conduct by Williams.

Pat Madros of Nulato said he thought such independent action hurt the strength and credibility of the U.S. negotiating team, and demanded a formal apology from TCC.

Upriver and downriver representatives also joined together to express their concern over the interception of salmon before they reach the Yukon river. They also expressed a desire to meet more often to discuss common problems.

"Now that we've started good public relations all along the river, I'm all for it. We can't be talking upriver and downriver when these issues come up," said Jimmy F. Walker of Holy Cross.