UPPER COOK INLET TASK FORCE MEETING SUMMARY

(January 14, 2013; Challenger Learning Center, Kenai, Alaska)

January 14, 2013
Challenger Learning Center
Kenai, Alaska
Call to Order: ~9:10 AM.
Adjourn: ~4:00 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT:
Vince Webster (BOF)
Tom Kluberton (BOF)
Dennis Gease (Personal Use)
Jim Butler III (Set Gillnetter)
Robert Williams (Set Gillnetter)
Ken Coleman (Set Gillnetter)
Ian Pitzman (Drift Gillnetter)
Dwight Kramer (Sport Fisher)
Kevin Delany (Sport Fisher)
Andy Szczensy (Guided Sport Fisher)

MEMBERS ABSENT:
Luther Anderson (Guided Marine Sport Fisher)

PURPOSE OF THE TASK FORCE:

- To identify and discuss alternative management strategies that allow set gillnetting for sockeye salmon in the East Side Set gillnet fishery (ESSN) and inriver use of Kenai River king salmon during times of low king salmon abundance.
  - Input from the public is imperative.
- To bring forward a set of recommendations to the Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) at the March 2013 Statewide Finfish meeting.
  - Should have a board generated proposal several weeks in advance of the March BOF meeting.
  - Town hall style meetings with the focus on task force members similar to BOF committee meetings. Consensus on alternatives is preferred but not necessary for the BOF to discuss changes.
  - Management alternatives would likely be reflected in the Late Run King Salmon Management Plan *5 AAC 21.359.*

MEETING SYNOPSYS:
After welcome and introductions, the task force meeting started off with a department presentation titled "Run Reconstruction and Interim Escapement Goal Recommendation for Kenai River Late-Run King Salmon" by Robert Clark. The presentation was followed by a question and answer period regarding the run reconstruction and recommended escapement goal. The Q&A on the presentation was followed by a series of proposals and discussions on alternative management strategies when the department projects the abundance of late-run king salmon will be below the escapement goal. The following meeting summary is organized around the department presentation and the proposals presented and discussed during the task force meeting.

UPPER COOK INLET TASK FORCE MEETING SUMMARY

(January 14, 2013; Challenger Learning Center, Kenai, Alaska)

PRESENTATION: RUN RECONSTRUCTION AND INTERIM ESCAPEMENT GOAL RECOMMENDATION FOR KENAI RIVER LATE-RUN KING SALMON (ROBERT CLARK, ADF&G; SEE TASK FORCE WEBSITE).

TASK FORCE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FOLLOWING ROBERT CLARK'S PRESENTATION.

- Is the new SEG based on real fish counted by the DIDSON, or does it include an estimate of fish not counted by the DIDSON (i.e., fish that swim behind or above the sonar)?
    - Response: The SEG includes estimates of fish that swim behind or above the DIDSON.
- How much longer will the department operate the lower (mile 8.6) sonar site?
    - Response: It will remain in operation in 2013. Its continued use will depend on how well the new sonar site works.
- What are a few things that make you (Robert Clark) uncomfortable with the analysis?
    - Response: The analysis is a break through; however, there are still uncertainties with the new method. We can only confidently make predictions within the range of available data. The lower end of the goal has more uncertainty than the upper end of the goal. The 15,000 fish lower end of the goal is the balance between the risk of run failure and lost yields.
- There is a gap in passage data for the August segment of late-run king salmon. The 2012 run was odd, but how can the department evaluate it properly when the sonar project is pulled out in early August?
    - Response: The sonar project traditionally ended in early August in some years it ended early due to pink salmon influencing target strength estimates of king salmon. With the use of DIDSON and the new sonar site, these problems should be taken care of and the project should be able to run longer in August.
- Does the new escapement goal allocate king salmon to the inriver users?
    - Response: No, the goal maximizes yields throughout the range.
- Could the high returns of king salmon in past years be a factor in the poor returns we are observing now?
    - Response: Yes, this system can be spawning limited. Data also show that there might be environmental factors as well.
- Does data from the big runs help for predicting what happens for returns from the lower end of the goal?
    - Response: Yes it does. Data from the large escapements in early 2000's help us to know the carrying capacity of the river, which in turn helps us to know what escapements maximize yields.
- Can managers rely on the new sonar site in 2013? What about a combination of the two sites?
    - Response: The department cannot start to use the new sonar site for management until we are confident in its performance.
- Will the department continue to use the netting program for run timing information?
    - Response: The netting program has been in place since the early 2000's just below the old sonar site (mile 8.6). This project would be the best for collecting

run timing information as it has operated through August 10 each year or until the sonar is removed whichever is later.

- Is there a 2013 Kenai River late-run king salmon forecast?
  - Response: No, the department has not issued a pre-season forecast for 2013.
- Why is the king salmon harvest from the marine recreation fishery and drift gillnet fishery considered to be 100% Kenai River origin?
  - Response: The king salmon harvest from these fisheries is relatively small and there are no genetic data from these fisheries to apportion the harvest to different stocks.
- How does the new DIDSON goal compare to the old target strength based goal?
  - Response: The department does not know; it is like comparing apples to oranges. However, the analysis does show that harvest has remained consistent (around 40%).
- Will the public get daily assessments of late-run king run strength?
  - Response: There will be bi-weekly updates.
- What methods can the department use to better predict late runs?
  - Response: The department can continue to look at inriver run timing data, and information gathered from the marine tagging study.
- Bi-weekly reports on king salmon run strength may be insufficient for commercial fisheries management.
  - Response: The DIDSON estimates will come out bi-weekly; however, indices and the daily threshold estimates (composed of larger fish) will be available. The threshold estimates track abundance. Getting the final DIDSON estimates is very time intensive.
- What fraction of the age 1.1 and age 1.2 king salmon spawn?
  - Response: They all do.
- Who are the peer reviewers of the escapement goal report?
  - They will be acknowledged in the final report.
- What is the relationship between the early and late run?
  - Response: This will become clearer when the reconstruction of the early run is completed. However, the indices match up fairly well for the two runs.
- What is the difference between a BEG and a SEG?
  - Response: The new Kenai River is an SEG because it is based on a run reconstruction and new/emerging methods. BEG's are typically derived from hard number of fish (i.e., weir counts).
- With the new data, how might the department manage in 2013?
  - Response: If the 2013 run is similar to the 2012 run, we would likely go through a similar situation with restrictions and a closure. However, the days and times of the restrictions will likely be different to reflect the better quality of data.

STATUS OF ESCAPEMENT REPORT AND REVIEW:

The draft escapement goal report was sent out for peer review in December 2012. The department has not received back all of the comments from peer reviewers. The report will be finalized when all comments have been received. It is anticipated that the report will be finalized and posted to the department website when it is completed in mid-February 2013.

UPPER COOK INLET TASK FORCE MEETING SUMMARY

(January 14, 2013; Challenger Learning Center, Kenai, Alaska)

PRESENTATION: PROPOSAL BY ESSN GROUP (SEE TASK FORCE WEBSITE FOR PRESENTATION).

TASK FORCE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FOLLOWING THE ESSN PRESENTATION.

- Believes there is too much uncertainty around the lower end of the goal. Not going to agree to an OEG with a lower bound of 11,000 king salmon.
- The lower end of the OEG (11,000 king salmon) is based on the yield curve. The ESSN exploitation on king salmon is approximately 13% regardless of how many fish are present. It is not a reasonable trade off to forgo sockeye harvest to save a few hundred king salmon with questionable counting.
- This proposal brings forward language that allows the plan to be opened. This is a good structure to work with.

PROPOSAL: DWIGHT KRAMER (SEE TASK FORCE WEBSITE FOR PROPOSAL LANGUAGE).

TASK FORCE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FOLLOWING DWIGHT CRAMER'S PROPOSAL.

- Has the department had any discussion about the new goal or how far below the lower end it will be willing to go?
    - Response: The department has discussed the lower end, but has not discussed a sustainable escapement threshold (SET).
- Does the 15,000 fish lower end of the goal approach the SET?
    - Response: No.
- Having a catch and release fishery makes it difficult to sell guided trips. No bait usually results in ~50% lost bookings.
- If the run is bad enough to go to catch and release, just close it.
- Wants to support something at the end of the day that puts the fish at less risk.
- Need to find a way to prosecute both fisheries at times of low king abundance, but do it in a way that does not preclude the history of the fisheries.
- Windows and regular periods are important to all the fisheries.
- How would inriver users respond if the Friday window remains in place, but float the Tuesday window?
    - Response: The Friday window is necessary, but regular periods and windows do tie the hands of managers. Putting these plans to fish at low abundance would shift the harvest of fish more towards the ESSN fishery.
- The ESSN (above the Blanchard Line) used to start fishing June 25th, but that was changed to July 8th 25 years ago specifically for king salmon conservation.
- Not in favor of catch and release fishing. Believes it deprives local, unguided fishermen opportunity.
- Under the proposed plans, the harvest of king salmon could be skewed more towards the commercial fishery than the sport fishery.
- If the inriver fishery is closed or restricted, the guides have options; if the ESSN closes, they have no options for fishing. They bear a bigger financial hardship.

- The OEG is proposed to go as low as 13,000 fish to avoid putting the inriver fishery on catch and release.
- Abundance based management is important for these proposals.
- The department learned hard lessons on how to count king salmon last year. When in the month is it most effective to project king salmon runs?
    - Response: Looking at run timing, July 11th is the quarter point of the run and July 19th is the midpoint. These are critical times for projecting the run.
- Last year (2012) when the fishery closed the tools were not there to reopen the fishery.
    - Response: The fishery did reopen.
- If we get into the situation of 2012, need to have the tools to step down fisheries.
- We are looking for a balance of going from no bait and catch and release for the sport fishery and commensurate restrictions in the ESSN fishery.
- When talking about economic tradeoffs, we can overshadow the conservation of the resource.
- It is important to have the perspective of what happens to the community as a whole when the fisheries are restricted.

PROPOSAL: KEVIN DELANY (SEE TASK FORCE WEBSITE FOR PROPOSAL LANGUAGE).

TASK FORCE QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FOLLOWING KEVIN DELANY'S PROPOSAL.

- The Orange Zone goal is 15,000 to 20,000 fish
    - If the inriver fishery goes to no bait, the ESSN goes to the equivalent of 2 regular periods.
- What percentage of the river is closed above the Soldotna Bridge?
    - Response ~79% of the harvest occurs below the Soldotna Bridge during years the fishery is not restricted, in 2011 and 2012 it was restricted or closed above the bridge.
- With a bare minimum of fish, it is believed that this proposal would get us through the season with no bait, single hook, and 2 commercial periods/week.
- There is still concern over the early run mainstem spawners.
- The July 1st to July 15th restrictions address early run issues to some extent.
- When the river is closed above the Soldotna Bridge, the ESSN should be restricted in kind.
- The Task Force would fail in its mission if it does nothing to address the consequences of these actions to the sockeye salmon run.
    - If we decrease efficiency of the fleet, we could put too many fish up the river.
- Because these proposals are experimental, they need to have the least amount of moving parts.
- Was the OEG for sockeye salmon exceeded in 2012?
    - Response: No.
- If we approach the upper end of the sockeye salmon OEG, we may see declining yields, year after year.
- If the upper river is closed to achieve a harvest reduction of ~10%, what could the ESSN do to restrict in kind?

- Time is how the ESSN should be restricted, not with gear reductions.
- Alternative gear types should be explored with the ESSN.
- The ESSN should not be treated separately.
- Which stock is more important, the sockeye salmon or the king salmon?
    - Response: The department puts a priority on meeting the lower end of goal over exceeding one.
- We are trading millions of sockeye to save a few hundred king salmon.
- It is important to put something on the table for a stop gap measure to keep 2012 from happening again.
    - It is likely that 2013 will take care of itself, in 2012, there was a surplus of king salmon, we just didn't know it at the time.
- Because of the accurate inseason king harvest data from the ESSN, could the department manage not to exceed a cap?
- We should try to not fix a problem that isn't there; we may be overcomplicating inseason management.
- In times of low abundance, we need a reasonable policy that can maximize sockeye salmon harvest.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

- Believes that sockeye salmon drive the local economy, not king salmon.
- The yield from a king salmon escapement of 11,000 fish is roughly equal to the yield from a spawning escapement of 30,000 fish. The department's proposed goal includes a hidden sport fishing allocation.
- Is there really an equal reduction in the harvest of king salmon?
    - Response: It is about reducing the harvest potential the same; ratcheting down by an equal amount.
- The Task Force should present proposals earlier in the day at the next meeting to help facilitate a better discussion.
- King salmon fisheries are very important for the state. The lowest king salmon escapement that has seen a complete return is 22,000 fish.
- Why should the ESSN take a hit if inriver restrictions make the harvest rates from both fisheries equal?
    - Response: The fisheries put the fish at risk. Sockeye are managed for commercial use and the harvest of king salmon should be minimized by the commercial fishery. King salmon should be managed for sport use.
- We have an issue with counting the fish; we need a better count so we won't have this issue anymore.
- Urges extreme caution at the lower end of the goal.
- Need to honor historic harvest allocation between gear types
- Harvest allocation to commercial fishers becomes less and less.

DATA REQUEST

- A thorough explanation of harvest rates by the different user groups.