



THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR SEAN PARNELL

RC 021 Department of
Fish and Game

DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES
Headquarters Office

1255 West 8th Street
P.O. Box 115526
Juneau, Alaska 99811-5526
Main: 907.465.4210
Fax: 907.465.2604

TO: Karl Johnstone, Chair
Alaska Board of Fisheries

DATE: December 9, 2013

THRU: Jeff Regnart, Director
Division of Commercial Fisheries

SUBJECT: Petition to allow
purse seines to
commercially harvest
Yukon River summer
chum salmon

FROM: John Linderman, Region III Regional Supervisor
Division of Commercial Fisheries

This letter provides Alaska Department of Fish and Game (department) staff assessment of a petition submitted by the Yukon Delta Fisheries Development Association (YDFDA) dated November 25, 2013 to the Alaska Board of Fisheries (board) to consider an emergency action out of cycle.

Action Requested

This petition requests the board to authorize use of purse seine gear for commercial harvest of Yukon River summer chum salmon in districts 1–3 during times of king salmon conservation. Secondly, the petition requests consideration of allowing monofilament purse seine web in this fishery.

Background

The board addressed an agenda change request for this same issue at the October 2013 work session. Current commercial fishing regulations allow gillnet gear, either set gillnet or drift gillnet, in districts 1–3 commercial fisheries. Harvest of surplus Yukon River summer chum salmon has been greatly reduced during recent years because of the need to minimize incidental harvest of king salmon during poor runs. In January 2013, the board adopted new regulations in an effort to harvest surplus summer chum salmon while minimizing the impact on king salmon. By emergency order, during times of king salmon conservation, commercial permit holders may use dip net and beach seine gear to harvest summer chum salmon and are required to release king salmon alive. Additionally, gillnets may be restricted to 5 ½-inch or smaller mesh size, not exceeding 30 meshes in depth. New regulations also give the department the authority to prohibit the sale of king salmon in the Yukon River during times of king salmon conservation.

In response to a poor king salmon run and a concurrent strong summer chum salmon run, liberal commercial fishing opportunity with dip net and beach seine gear was allowed in 2013 to harvest the surplus summer chum salmon in Yukon Area districts 1 and 2. Dip nets were surprisingly

successful and accounted for approximately half of the summer chum salmon harvest taken with these new gear types. Unfortunately, due to the high water conditions present during the summer season, operation of beach seines was difficult and very few fishermen chose to utilize that gear. Approximately 188,000 summer chum salmon were harvested by dip net gear and 1,000 summer chum salmon in beach seines. It is believed that minimal impact to king salmon was incurred using these gear types, with approximately 900 king salmon reported as released alive during these commercial fishing periods.

As in recent years, the use of gillnet gear was delayed until well after the midpoint of the king salmon run to reduce incidental harvest of king salmon. The first six commercial gillnet periods in District 1 were restricted to 5 ½-inch or smaller mesh size, not exceeding 30 meshes in depth. This gear option was used until the vast majority of the king salmon run was passed and the gillnet restriction was then relaxed to the long-established regulatory 6-inch or smaller mesh size. The preliminary cumulative summer chum salmon commercial harvest for districts 1 and 2 with all gear types combined was approximately 380,000 fish, the largest on record since 1989.

However, despite the marked improvement in commercial summer chum salmon harvest, there was a foregone commercial harvest of approximately one million fish. Preliminary feasibility work using purse seine gear and monofilament webbing was conducted by YDFDA in July and August 2013 after most of the king salmon run had passed. It is critical that any gear specification and operations minimize mortality of king salmon and other nontarget species, and that king salmon can be safely and easily returned to the water unharmed. Additionally, it should be noted that despite taking the most restrictive conservation measures ever implemented in the Yukon River drainage, only three of seven king salmon escapement goals were achieved in 2013.

Finding of Emergency

Under the criteria listed in the Joint Board Petition Policy used by the board in determining whether or not an emergency exists, paragraph (f) of 5 AAC 96.625 reads, in pertinent part:

...In this section, an emergency is an unforeseen, unexpected event that either threatens a fish or game resource, or an unforeseen, unexpected resource situation where a biologically allowable resource harvest would be precluded by delayed regulatory action and such delay would be significantly burdensome to the petitioners because the resource would be unavailable in the future.

At this time, there is not an unforeseen or unexpected event that threatens a fish resource. There is not an unforeseen, unexpected resource situation where a biologically allowable resource harvest would be precluded by delayed regulatory action. For several years, an available surplus of summer chum salmon has not been harvested, primarily because of the need to conserve king salmon, which precludes a biologically allowable harvest. It is anticipated that this situation will continue in 2014. The next Arctic–Yukon–Kuskokwim board meeting is scheduled for 2015/2016, which is two fishing seasons from now.

Summary

It is difficult to determine that a finding of an emergency under 5 AAC 96.625 (f) has been satisfied by this petition. This situation has been ongoing for several years. Thus, it is not an unexpected or unforeseen event. While new gear regulations adopted in 2013 allowed for an increase in commercial harvest of summer chum salmon, there remained a large surplus available for harvest. Although it is likely that the commercial harvest of summer chum salmon will increase as more permit holders use the new gear types available, it is acknowledged these gear types are less efficient than traditional gillnet gear. In the present situation, it is very difficult to maximize the harvest of summer chum salmon while preventing mortality of king salmon. Any effort to provide additional commercial harvest opportunity must first and foremost ensure continued conservation of Yukon River king salmon, which is a stock of concern.

cc: Cora Campbell, Commissioner
Glenn Haight, Executive Director, Boards Support Section
Sue Aspelund, Deputy Director, Division of Commercial Fisheries
Forrest R. Bowers, Deputy Director, Division of Commercial Fisheries
Lisa Olson, Deputy Director, Division of Subsistence
Tom Brookover, Deputy Director, Division of Sport Fish