

Official Statement to the Alaska Board of Fisheries from Melissa Norris, *Fish Alaska Magazine*

Thank you for hearing me out. My name is Melissa Norris. I am one of the owners and founders of Fish Alaska and Hunt Alaska magazines. I have held this job for over 22 years since our inception. I first fished the Nushagak River in the early 2000's and over the last half of a decade I have come back annually. I have perceived a steady decline in the numbers and size of king salmon from each recent year I have fished here, as have my friends and associates who fish the Nush daily during king season year after year. We are seeing less kings, smaller kings, and a majority of them are marked up by nets. It seems pretty clear what is happening from an in river observational standpoint.

There are lots of arguments on this subject, the fire is fueled from every angle. Everyone wants to protect what they perceive is theirs. I'm thankful on many levels to be here today, to reasonably discuss what needs to be done, and to share the burden with all user groups as the right thing to do.

Fishing is labeled as a sport for me. I am called a sport fisherman because I harvest my own food with a rod and reel. I certainly enjoy every minute of being out on the water in the Alaska wilderness, it fills my soul and fuels my spirit. I suppose that's somewhat sporting, but when I fish for salmon, as I do on the Nushagak, it's for harvest, subsistence and sustainability. And there are countless Alaskans who model that lifestyle. I find it frustrating to see my own user group limited when folks from all over the world gain economically from Bristol Bay salmon harvest at the expense of my tribe.

A question becomes what percentage of the problem stems from what areas of usage. The sport side has a smaller effect, still I wholeheartedly support conservation from every side. We want to see the Chinook fishery restored. We want massive issues like trawl fleet bycatch and commercial netter regulations reformed for the greater good of all. Our people have been looking to ADFG for solutions for years. We are on board to support what needs to be done but in a manner equivalent to the harm we are doing while others follow suit in their sectors.

It's concerning to me that special interest groups purport we don't have enough data to make decisions. We should spend years planning, raising funds and implementing new counting equipment, but we don't have years. Those of us who actually spend time on the river year after year are verifying the decline that the existing counters are showing. I am afraid they don't want to hear it because it doesn't align with their financial goals. The talk then turns to the concept of forgone harvest as though making the most money now is more important than conserving an industry and natural resource for all.

That said, in our collective opinion the following seem to be the most reasonable actions:

On the sportfishing side we can live with one of two options, an adjustment to four kings total annually with one over 28" and three over 20". Jack kings would not count. We will do our stewardship to educate why we need to preserve these adult kings. The second best option is the adjustment to two kings annually because at least it still allows us to fish and sustain our related businesses. That said, we are not clear on why this must be decided now instead of as an Emergency Order during the season as it has been issued in recent years under current regulations.

On the commercial side processors are scrambling to keep up with record harvests. Local Alaskan family owned commercial fishing businesses are having to compete with larger, outside

interests who are not concerned about quality. It's degrading the market, as is the amount of supply against the demand. I simply don't understand why the common goal isn't to drive the price per pound up while reducing the amount of total harvest...just on principal. Arguments about over escapement are a farce since runs were sustainable for decades long before commercial fishing even entered the picture. As a conservation method equivalent to the amount of pressure put on the resource from that user group, we support a hard opener for commercial gill and set netters on June 28 as long as 15% of the sockeye harvest is past the sonars at Portage Creek to open the district. This will improve king salmon escapement and survival while keeping the commercial sockeye fishery plenty viable.

After all is said and done and the Bristol Bay commercial fishing industry has processed their 40 million pounds of fish, how much is actually consumed and how much goes to waste? There has to be a shift in the way we think if we want to keep our precious natural resources alive. I beg you to think about that.