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Advisory Announcement

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2024 KOTZEBUE SOUND SALMON MANAGEMENT OUTLOOK

INTRODUCTION

The Kotzebue District salmon fisheries management outlook is to inform fishermen, processors, and other interested people of the management strategies for the commercial salmon fishery. The Kotzebue District includes all waters from Cape Prince of Wales to Point Hope. The Kotzebue District is divided into three subdistricts. Subdistrict 2, near the mouth of the Noatak River is closed to commercial fishing by regulation. Most fishing occurs in Subdistrict 1, which is subdivided into six statistical areas to help managers determine catch location (Figure 1). Within the Kotzebue District, chum salmon *Oncorhynchus keta* are the most abundant anadromous fish. Other salmon species (Chinook *O. tshawytscha*, pink *O. gorbuscha*, coho *O. kisutch*, and sockeye salmon *O. nerka*) occur in lesser numbers, as do Dolly Varden *Salvelinus malma*, and sheefish (inconnu) *Stenodus leucichthys*.

2024 RUN OUTLOOK

The outlook for the 2024 season is based on the parent-year returns and returning age classes observed in the commercial catch samples in 2023. During the 2024 season, the salmon return is expected to have a 4-year-old component that is below average based on the previous season's 3-year-old return. The 5-year-old component of the run is expected to be above average based on the 4-year-old return last season. The 3-year-old and 6-year-old age classes are generally minimal components of the run and are expected to be average. The commercial harvest is expected to fall within the range of 200,000 to 300,000 chum salmon with two buyers expected to operate in July.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The fishery is scheduled to open July 10 and close August 31 unless extended by emergency order because of an unexpected strong late run. The department expects there to be two buyers this year with operations ceasing prior to the regulatory closure date.

Primary commercial fishery management objectives are to provide adequate chum salmon passage through the commercial fishery: (1) to ensure sustained runs by allowing adequate escapement, and (2) to meet subsistence harvest needs. Fishery management will be dependent on comparing period and cumulative season catch rates to prior years and test fishing results on the Kobuk River if available.

Age composition of commercial salmon catches will be monitored to determine the strength of age classes in the run. Older salmon, which tend to migrate into freshwater first, may increase catch rates early in the season due to a stronger expected 5-year-old return.

During the first week of the fishery, there are expected to be daily 8-hour fishing periods, except Saturday. If the return is weaker than expected the department may limit fishing time in the following weeks depending on commercial catches, upriver subsistence harvest reports, and test fisheries at the Kobuk River project.

If commercial catches indicate adequate run strength and test fish catches are sufficient, the department will allow commercial fishing to continue based on market conditions and escapement indicators. Likewise, in August as the Noatak River chum salmon run passes through the district, the department will consider fishing restrictions if commercial catches indicate a weak run.

If the run is weaker than expected the department will establish periodic closures of the fishery and fishing time may be reduced to every other day or less. If concern arises about salmon runs, the department will notify the fishermen and the buyers about the need to reduce commercial fishing time.

Last year the department consistently allowed fishing to occur 6 days per week 8 hours per day with the exception of the week of July 24 when fishing was restricted to 5 days that week for 9 hours per day. The buyers notified the department that they would cease operations on August 22, 9 days before the season ended on August 31 by regulation.

No subsistence fishing restrictions are expected in 2024.

ESCAPEMENT OBJECTIVES

Inseason escapement-based management will consist of one test fish project on the Kobuk River and reports from subsistence fishers. The test fishing project on the Kobuk River, in the vicinity of Kiana, will provide an inseason index of chum salmon passage. The department has a cumulative catch index objective of 600 for the season at the test fish project. If the index is projected to fall short of 600, then the commercial fishery may close or have reduced time until the test fish index projection indicates adequate escapement into the Kobuk River.

Management strategies provide for escapement within sustainable escapement goal ranges (SEG) for each river system. These ranges, developed in 2018, are based on an analysis of historical harvest and escapement information of specific index areas within major drainages. These aerial survey escapement objectives are: (1) subject to continued review, (2) intended to evaluate escapement trends between years, and (3) are not a total count of the salmon escapement. The Noatak and upper Kobuk Rivers may be flown if weather conditions permit. The chum salmon escapement goals are as follows: Noatak River (mouth to Kelly Bar, including the Eli River) 43,000–92,800 fish, and upper Kobuk River and Selby River 12,000–32,100 fish. Aerial surveys have not been flown in the Kotzebue District since 2014.

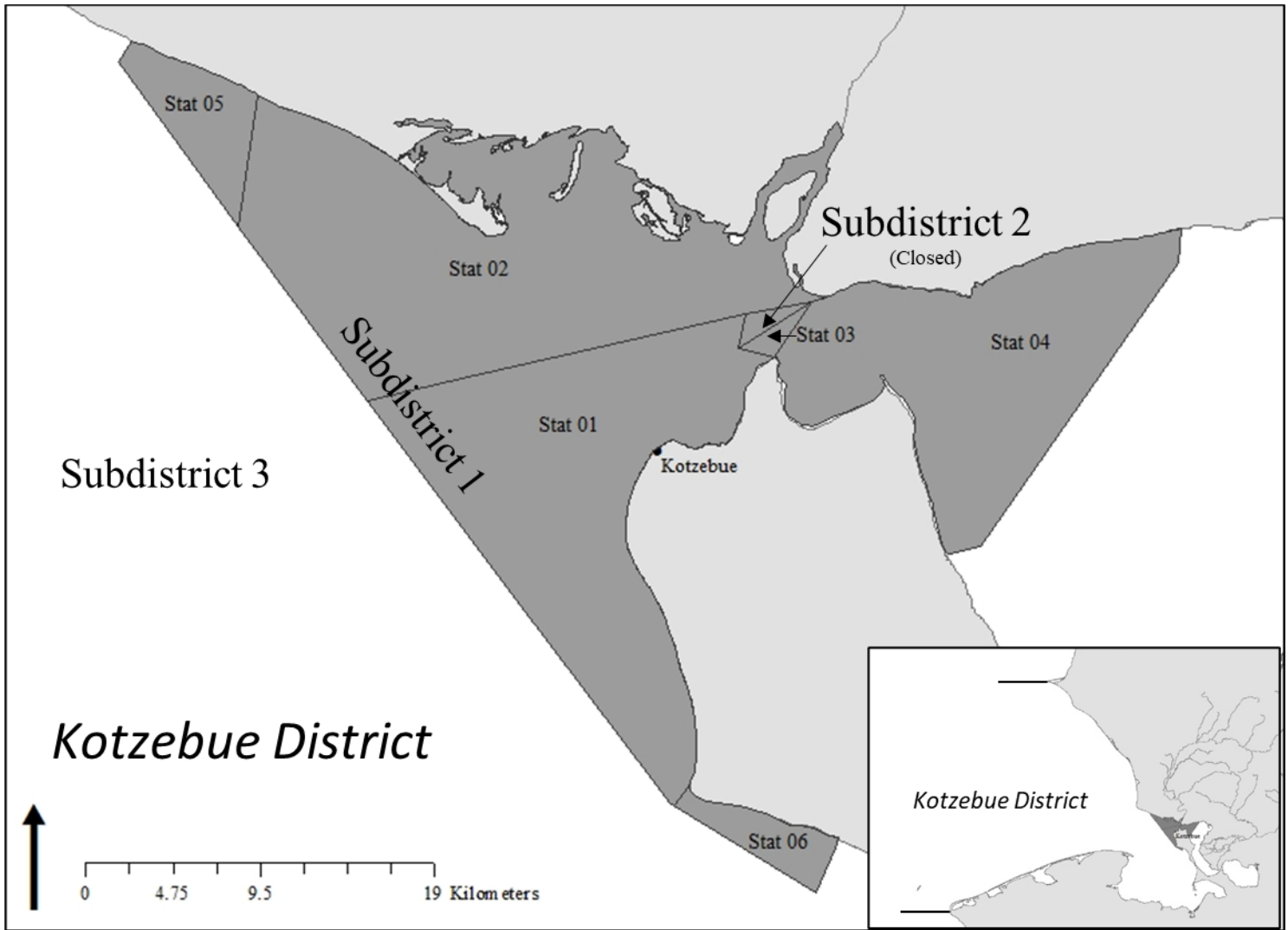


Figure 1.—Kotzebue Sound salmon subdistricts.