

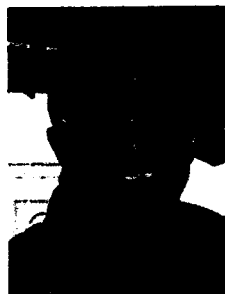
Northern lights

Wheeling in the chums



This spring the Yukon River saw its first commercial chum salmon fishery in 14 years. The Alaska Board of Fisheries and Department of Fish and Game embraced an experimental opening using manned fish wheels in the 4-A district of Kaltag.

A fish wheel is a form of water wheel, powered by a river's current. It is a gentle capture method that results in minimal capture mortality of target



By Arni Thomson

and incidental species. The board authorization of an unrestricted season opening date was a result of the fish wheel's ability to return healthy bycatch to the river and

the need for a minimum 30-day fishing window to justify startup costs for the Kaltag fish plant. The incidental catch of concern on the Yukon River is chinook salmon.

Like most of us in the seafood industry, I am acutely aware of the need to continually improve our sustainability practices, highlighted by efforts to reduce our carbon footprint and explore and implement bycatch reduction technology. Last summer, while knocking around in the Copper River Basin, I sought the opportunity to visit a few non-commercial, subsistence fish wheels, which Fish & Game registers on the Copper and Yukon river drainages.

Doug Karlberg and Gary Nelson of Yukon River Gold invited me to come to Kaltag to see the commercial wheels in operation. Karlberg, Nelson and the mayor of Kaltag, Violet Burnham, have struggled for four years under tight conservation restrictions to convince a small cadre of fish wheel operators to voluntarily release chinooks alive and only retain chum salmon. This helped Karlberg and his supporters to convince Fish & Game and the Board of Fisheries to allow them to use fish wheels by regulation — if they were manned

while in operation, to release chinooks. Authorization sent Karlberg and Nelson on a hunt for used plant machinery and supplies that they could get on a barge in time for the mid-June start.

The next obstacle was the near record ice coverage of the Bering Sea, and extended cold water conditions that delayed the arrival of chums. On July 8, the fishery started. In the short span of 17 days, Yukon River Gold, with fish-

ermen operating nine fish wheels, landed an average of 3,660 pounds per wheel per day, and a rotating double-shift plant crew of 60 workers from six villages on the river had processed 100,000 fish (the local area quota allowed for 300,000 fish).

This equated to 560,000 processed pounds of headed and gutted keta salmon (chum's market name) and roe.

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The product was stored in freezer vans, which were loaded onto a barge at the end of August, taken upriver to Fairbanks and then shipped down the Alcan Highway to waiting markets. The harvest of 100,000 chums was taken with an incidental catch of only 59 chinooks, all of which were released within a few minutes of capture. Karlberg estimates the fishery injected \$300,000 into the local economy, with similar potential for the fall chum season in August.

Two Bering Sea Community Development Quota corporations are helping Kaltag survive economically. The Bristol Bay and Yukon Delta CDQ corporations with their seafood company partners, Ocean Beauty and Kwik'Pak Fisheries, have provided ongoing technical and marketing assistance to Kaltag and Yukon River Gold. The corporations have made possible this 2012 season, the first year Yukon River Gold will break even. Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute promotion of keta salmon products has also played into a great story beginning to unfold.

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Arni Thomson is the president of the United Fishermen of Alaska, based in Juneau.