

ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES
FINDINGS ON COPPER RIVER KING SALMON MANAGEMENT PLAN
2006-249-FB

May 3, 2006

In December 2005 the Board of Fisheries amended and adopted proposal 52 which established one mandatory commercial fishing closure within the inside statistical areas of the Copper River District during each statistical week 20 and 21. The initial proposal requested that only one 12-hour opening be allowed within the inside statistical areas during each of the first three statistical weeks (20, 21, and 22). Several amendments were made to the original proposal during deliberations to reduce impacts on the commercial fishery, provide for Copper River District subsistence users and small boat users who fish within the inside statistical area, and allow the Department some flexibility in management while still providing additional fish for the upriver subsistence users. The Board was uncertain of the exact effects of the proposal as modified, but discussed the expectation of significant increases in early run king salmon escapement and the possibility of increasing sockeye escapement.

Background

At its 1996 Copper River/Prince William Sound meeting, the Board adopted the Copper River King Salmon Management Plan 5 AAC 24.361. This initial version of the plan mandated a 5 percent reduction in king salmon harvest potential across the commercial, personal use, and sport fisheries. This was attempted through potential closures of the inside statistical areas during statistical week 20 and 21 with consideration of the tides and other environmental factors, reducing the personal use bag limit from 5 to 4 king salmon, and prohibiting sport fish guiding on Tuesdays in the Copper River drainage from May 15 to July 31.

In 1999, the plan was amended to allow additional inside closures in the commercial fishery during statistical weeks 20, 21, and 22, remove the personal use component as the Chitina Subdistrict was classified a subsistence fishery during that meeting, and eliminate the guiding restriction, but reduce the seasonal sport bag limit from 5 to 4 king salmon. A spawning escapement range of 28,000 – 55,000 king salmon was established. In addition, when the Board made the Chitina Subdistrict dip net fishery a subsistence fishery the annual bag limit was reduced from 4 to 1 king salmon.

In 2003, the plan was again amended and established a sustainable escapement goal (SEG) of 24,000 king salmon or more which replaced the spawning escapement range.

Since the 2000 season, king salmon escapement goals have been included within the plan. During this period, the escapement goal for king salmon has been met three of the past six years, once under the spawning escapement range of 28,000 – 55,000 king salmon from 2000 – 2002 and twice under the SEG of 24,000 king salmon or more from 2003 – 2005. At the time of the Board adoption of proposal 52, the 2005 escapement data was preliminary, but staff reported that the goal would likely not be met in 2005.

Since 2000, commercial, sport, and personal use harvests of king salmon have generally declined, primarily a result of regulatory actions. At least one inside closure was instituted during each year from 2000 – 2003 and emergency orders restricting the upper Copper River sport fishery occurred in 2000 and 2005. The annual limit in the Chitina Subdistrict has remained at one king salmon since the Board adopted that limit to maintain harvests at historic levels when the fishery became a subsistence fishery; this limit was retained when the fishery once again a personal use fishery in 2003.

Sockeye salmon escapement goals as measured at the Miles Lake sonar have been met all but one year since 1996. The commercial fishery is managed to distribute the escapement throughout the duration of the run, yet due to run strength and environmental factors this is inherently difficult, and in some years while the total escapement goal may have been met, portions of the run may not have met the daily escapement goal. This could result in lower numbers in any portion of the Copper River run.

Public testimony and comments of some panel members during Committee C discussions indicated that those subsistence users fishing above the Gulkana River have seen reduced returns of king and sockeye salmon (primarily king salmon) and that subsistence needs had not been met in recent years. Sport anglers and personal use fishers also stated that king salmon numbers had declined. All upriver users agreed that there was a need to protect the early run component of the upper Copper River stocks and that the commercial fishery had high harvest potential during the first weeks of the season. Commercial fishers were concerned that the Department would lose flexibility in its management tools and that the current management tools were sufficient to manage for king salmon escapement and provide for early stocks. Committee C did not reach consensus on proposal 52.

Board Action

The Board brought the proposal to the table and following discussion and questions of staff regarding escapement levels and escapement goals adopted the first amendment which reduced the original proposal request of a mandatory closure during each of the first three statistical weeks to the first two statistical weeks (20 & 21). The amendment was adopted with a vote of 5/1. The Board discussed subsistence opportunity in the Copper River District, as this occurs at the same time as the commercial fishery with small skiffs within the inside statistical area closest to Cordova. A second amendment which defined the inside statistical areas that could be closed and excluded that area closest to Cordova used for subsistence fishing was adopted by a 5/1 vote. The Board then discussed the 12-hour inside opening limit and the management implications for Department staff. Staff responded that the 12-hour limit would provide less flexibility to respond to environmental conditions and run strength. An amendment to change the proposal language to one period within each of statistical weeks 20 and 21 for a inside statistical closure and remove the 12-hour limit was adopted by a vote of 4/2. The Board felt that the amended proposal was a compromise from the original proposal and would provide for additional fish for subsistence opportunity upriver and spawning escapement

and allow for subsistence opportunity in the Copper River District, while providing the Department some flexibility in its management.

Several Board members applied the Board's allocation criteria although there was disagreement among Board members about whether the criteria were applicable since the Board viewed the measure as providing for conservation and allowing users to harvest their existing allocations. The Board did not intend to change existing allocations to user groups, and rejected several proposals asking the Board to increase or restore prior more liberal bag limits and seasons.

The Board discussion of the allocation criteria under 5 AAC 39.205 addressed all seven allocation criteria:

- 1) On the first criteria, history of the fisheries, it was noted that all users have a long history of use of this Copper River resource, and that recent innovations in techniques have increased harvest rates significantly in some user groups.
- 2) On the second criteria, numbers of participants, it was noted that there are approximately 500 commercial users and thousands of upstream users, including residents of the North Star Borough and residents of communities throughout the river drainage. Additionally, residents from all over Alaska sport and subsistence fish on the Copper River.
- 3) On the third criteria, importance of each fishery for providing residents the opportunity to obtain fish for personal and family consumption, it was noted that both fisheries were important because some people retain commercially caught fish for personal consumption, but that many people did harvest fish in the personal use and subsistence fishery for consumption.
- 4) On the fourth criteria, availability of alternative fishery resources, it was noted that commercial fishermen displaced by an inside closure could move outside the closure area and still have reasonable opportunity to harvest fish. It was also noted that other stocks of fish were available to the commercial fishery over the season and that while that other stocks of salmon might be available to Interior users they were not of comparable quality and could not be efficiently accessed, such as Chinook in the lower Yukon or sockeye near Chignik.
- 5) On the fifth criteria, importance to the economy of the state, it was noted that commercial fishery was of great economic importance to the state and has long been established as major employer of Alaskans, creating seasonal cash flow to local coastal communities. It was also noted that the tourism industry multiplies the value of fish beyond its value in the commercial fishery. Copper River salmon have high economic value for sport fishing, tourism, commercial, and subsistence uses for the people of Alaska.
- 6) On the sixth criteria, importance to the economy of the region and local area, it was noted that that fishery is very important to Cordova but that the numbers of early run fish involved in proposal would be only a small percentage of the stock available. It was also noted that the fish were important to the tourism based economy of the upstream areas. For communities like Chitina, Copper Center, Glennallen, Delta Junction, North Pole, and Fairbanks, the Copper River Chinook and sockeye are the only source for sport fishing and related tourism industries.

7) On the seventh criteria, the importance of each fishery in providing recreational opportunities for residents and nonresidents, it was noted that the upstream fishery is very important in providing recreational opportunities. The Copper River salmon stocks provide opportunities for all communities along the river, including a growing recreational and sport fish guiding industry in the Cordova area

After deliberation the Board adopted proposal 52 as amended by the vote of 5/1.



Art Nelson, Chairman
Board of Fisheries

Approved: Carried (6 / 0 / 0 / 1) (Yes/No/Abstain/Absent)

Date: May 3, 2006

Location: Teleconference