

Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group

July 23, 2021

Mike Dunleavy, Governor
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 110001
Juneau, Alaska 99811-0001

Dear Governor Dunleavy,

The Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group (KRSMWG) requested information regarding the interception of chum salmon bound for the Kuskokwim River in Area M commercial fisheries harvests at its meeting with Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) staff on July 21, 2021. In short, we were told that we would have to reach out to ADF&G staff based in Kodiak ourselves to ask our questions as it was not fair to ask Kuskokwim Area staff to report on commercial fishing activities that occur elsewhere in Alaska, which is outside the scope of their job descriptions. To that end, we are writing to you to ask for your assistance in directing ADF&G to provide information regarding the interception of our Kuskokwim River chum salmon for commercial sales in the various fisheries that take place in Area M.

We understand that the Western Alaska Salmon Stock Identification Program (WASSIP) is no longer in operation, and that information resulting from that multi-partner effort is now quite dated. We understand that the South Unimak and Shumagin Islands June Salmon Management Plan (5 AAC 09.365) was designed by the Alaska Board of Fisheries to better manage the Area M commercial harvests of chum salmon bound for various spawning areas to mitigate the impacts of their interception to spawning tributaries such as the Kuskokwim River to avert chum salmon disasters that our river has experienced in the past. We understand that some of those original protections may no longer be in effect, or may have otherwise been revised to the extent that we are unsure as to what level our Kuskokwim River chum salmon may be intercepted by Area M commercial fishermen. We also understand that a decade or so ago, the abilities of the ADF&G Gene Conservation Laboratory to distinguish among Kuskokwim River chum salmon, Yukon River chum salmon, and other Western Alaska chum salmon stocks were limited. It is our hope that the significant funding that went into WASSIP has resulted in improvements in the State of Alaska's abilities to identify the specific chum salmon stocks being harvested for commercial purposes in Area M fisheries.

Now, that the Kuskokwim River and our neighbors in the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim region are experiencing a second year of record low chum salmon returns, unprecedented salmon fishing restrictions, and compounded customary and traditional food security crises given the ongoing Chinook salmon conservation crises, our elder fishermen are raising significant concerns as to whether Area M or False Pass chum salmon interception could be contributing to the 2020 and 2021 disastrous returns to our river, as well as to our relatives and neighbors living on the Yukon River?

We are also contacting the Governor's Office to request more information regarding the role and impact of the Bering Sea bycatch of our Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon and Kuskokwim River chum salmon. This is a recurring agenda item at our weekly KRSMWG meetings; however, Kuskokwim Area ADF&G Commercial Fisheries Division staff are only able to look at the Bering Sea bycatch reports on-line and share that information with us. While Chinook salmon bycatch is specifically reported, the available information does not provide us with specific bycatch numbers for chum salmon. Again, the KRSMWG wishes to better understand the effect of bycatch of our Kuskokwim River chum salmon in the Bering Sea pollock commercial fishery where our salmon are supposed to be prohibited species. Therefore, we also are requesting your assistance in directing necessary ADF&G and/or federal staff to meet with the KRSMWG to provide an overview of existing information, data trends, on ongoing efforts to evaluate the impact of these interceptions on the returns of Chinook and chum salmon to the Kuskokwim River watershed.

In closing, we are specifically asking that the Governor's Office direct state officials and staff to bring the requested expertise and information related to the commercial fishing interceptions of our Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon and chum salmon in state-managed Area M commercial fisheries and to federal-managed Bering Sea pollock commercial fisheries to a meeting of the KRSMWG. We are highly dependent on these species to meet our priority customary and traditional uses and our food security and subsistence needs are not being met.

Sincerely,

KRSMWG Co-Chairs

[signatures – make sure to follow KRSMWG letter-writing policy]