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United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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FWS\AFES

Agenda Item B-6: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report
December 09, 2015

Federal Subsistence Management of Chinook Salmon:

Most stocks of Alaskan Chinook Salmon have been in low or below average abundance in recent years and resulted in numerous fisheries restrictions and closures. This trend continued in 2015, including restrictions and closures of Federally managed subsistence fisheries. In conjunction with Alaska Department of Fish and Game managers, Federal fisheries managers took the following actions:

Kuskokwim River:

The 2015 forecast was for a return of 96,000-163,000 Chinook Salmon, which fell within and above the drainage-wide sustainable escapement goal (SEG) range of 65,000–120,000 Chinook Salmon. Due to this low run projection, the Chinook Salmon fishery was restricted to Federally qualified subsistence users in all waters under Federal subsistence management jurisdiction (Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge) prior to the arrival and throughout the majority of the run. The 2015 Chinook Salmon return to the Kuskokwim Drainage was deemed not large enough to provide fish to meet both escapement and subsistence needs. The Federal subsistence management program allocated a total of 6,098 Chinook Salmon for harvest among the 32 villages along the Kuskokwim Drainage, of which 5,712 Chinook Salmon were harvested under a Federal Community Harvest Permit. Normally, 70,000 – 80,000 Chinook Salmon are harvested by subsistence users when run size allows. No other directed Chinook Salmon fishing was allowed the entire season. It is likely the low end of the Chinook Salmon SEG range was met in 2015 due to significant restrictions placed on the subsistence fisheries. Preliminary estimates indicate that the 2015 Chum Salmon run was below average. The 2015 Coho Salmon run was late and above average. Escapement goals for systems with weirs were met in all cases for Chinook, Chum, and Coho salmon.

Yukon River:

The 2015 forecast was for a run size from 118,000 to 140,000 Chinook Salmon, which is considered poor. Due to the low run projection, there was no directed Chinook Salmon commercial fishing the entire season and nearly all directed subsistence harvest opportunity was

restricted. For 2015, the US/Canada Yukon River Panel agreed to continue Interim Management Escapement Goals (IMEG) in Canada of 42,500-55,000 Chinook Salmon. The preliminary estimated border passage for Canadian-origin Chinook salmon, based on cumulative passage at the Eagle sonar project and historical run timing, was approximately 83,400 Chinook Salmon, which is above the high end of the Canadian IMEG. As a result of considerable conservation efforts by subsistence fishermen, the 2015 Chinook Salmon run has the potential to meet escapement goals and objectives, despite the in-season estimate being below average in run size. Post-season total run size reconstruction is expected to be available in late February.

Kenai River:

The State of Alaska's Kenai River and Kasilof River Early-run King Salmon Management Plan identifies an optimal escapement goal (OEG) of 5,300 to 9,000 Chinook Salmon for the Kenai River. The final in-season sonar estimate of Chinook Salmon passage into the Kenai River during the early-run was 6,190 Chinook Salmon. While this amount of fish met the lower end of the OEG toward the end of run, the Federal subsistence fishery for Chinook Salmon remained closed by special action in the Kenai River downstream from the outlet of Skilak Lake through August 15. This Federal subsistence fishery remained closed due to conservation concerns for the estimated low number of early arriving Chinook Salmon which spawn in the main stem of the Kenai River within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge below Skilak Lake. The sport fishery for early-run Chinook Salmon throughout the Kenai River was closed preseason by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game through emergency order. The sport fishery for the late run took place with significant closed area restrictions for the season, but methods and means were liberalized during the last five days of the fishery when the run projections indicated that the late-run sustainable escapement goal of 15,000–30,000 Chinook Salmon would likely be achieved. The 2015 estimated late-run Kenai River Chinook Salmon escapement was 23,705 fish.

Karluk and Ayakulik Rivers:

The 2015 Chinook Salmon returns to the Karluk and Ayakulik rivers on Kodiak Island were poor, with only 2,777 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 4,000-8,000) counted at the Karluk River weir and 2,392 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 4,000-7,000) at the Ayakulik River weir. The 2015 Chinook salmon escapements into both systems did not provide enough fish for both escapement and subsistence needs. In an effort to conserve Chinook Salmon, a special action was issued for both rivers to prohibit the retention of Chinook salmon by Federally qualified subsistence users beginning June 19. This restrictive action was coordinated with the closure of the Chinook Salmon sport fisheries on both rivers by the State of Alaska also on June 19 due to conservation concerns.

Situk River:

The 2015 Chinook Salmon return to the Situk Rivers was extremely poor, with only 174 large Chinook Salmon (Biological Escapement Goal 450-1,050) counted at the weir. This weir count is the second lowest return on recent record, though similar to the 2010 return of 167 fish. Federal subsistence permits for Chinook salmon were not issued for a second consecutive year, bringing the total to six seasons that Federal management actions have been taken to protect this run.

Special Action Requests to the Federal Subsistence Board:

The Office of Subsistence Management received ten special action requests from rural communities within the Yukon and Kuskokwim river drainages requesting that the Federal Subsistence Board (Board) assume management of the 2015 salmon fisheries for both the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers. The special action requests sought to limit the 2015 Kuskokwim and Yukon River Chinook Salmon fisheries to Federally qualified subsistence users only, and to implement harvest allocations of Chinook Salmon among villages, communities, and Federally qualified subsistence users in the Kuskokwim and Yukon River drainages consistent with Section 804 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA).

Some requests received from both drainages asked that the Board assume management of other salmon stocks in addition to Chinook Salmon. Requests for the Yukon River Drainage include conducting an ANILCA Section 804 analysis similar to the one completed in 2014 for the Kuskokwim River drainage.

In response to the anticipated poor 2015 return, the Board deferred action on all of the Kuskokwim River special action requests until such time, during the season, the Chair determined it to be necessary for Federal involvement. The Board stated that the Federal in-season manager already had the delegated authority to address approved assumption of management for the Kuskokwim River Chinook Salmon subsistence fishery on Federal Conservation Units and limited participation to Federally qualified subsistence users. Due to low projected return, the Federal in-season manager subsequently took in-season action. For the second time in two years, a harvest allocation was implemented under Section 804 of ANILCA.

For the Yukon River, the Board considered the closure aspect of the submitted special actions unnecessary, as the in-season manager already had the authority to open and close Federal public waters of the Yukon River drainage to the harvest of salmon by non-Federally qualified users. Additionally, the Board determined that, given the complexity of the Yukon River fisheries management, including the health of multiple Chinook Salmon stocks, the size of the area, and the patchwork of jurisdictions, it would be difficult to equitably provide opportunity for the harvest of Chinook Salmon among Federally qualified subsistence users.

For further information, contact George Pappas, Office of Subsistence Management, at George_Pappas@fws.gov, or (907) 786-3822.

Endangered Species Act Issues:

Short-tailed albatross and Steller's eider

The Anchorage Fish & Wildlife Field Office is in formal consultation with NMFS on the management plans for the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands ground fish fisheries and the parallel fisheries in the State of Alaska. Consultation will address the fisheries effects on short-tailed albatross and Steller's eider and is expected to be completed by December 25th of this year.

For further information, contact Drew Crane, Regional Endangered Species Coordinator, Anchorage Fish and Wildlife Office, at Drew_Crane@fws.gov, or (907) 786-3323.

Migratory Bird Management Issues:

Seabird Mortality Events – Common Murres

Since spring (31 March 2015), seabird mortality events (mainly Common Murres) have been recorded throughout the northern Gulf of Alaska, including beaches on the Alaska Peninsula, Kodiak, Homer, Kenai Fjords, Seward, Prince William Sound (PWS), and Kayak and Wingham islands (southeast of PWS). Numbers of carcasses on any one beach have ranged from a dozen to several hundred. Region 7 Migratory Bird Management (MBM) has been networking with USFWS offices and Refuges, US Geological Survey (USGS), University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Alaska SeaLife Center, and the Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team (COASST) to monitor beaches and test carcasses for disease or toxins. Coordinating with the USGS National Wildlife Health Center (Madison, WI), to date we have sent 85 carcasses (62 Common Murres, 23 other species) for necropsies and tests. Nearly all dead birds were emaciated, indicating starvation. Only one tufted puffin has tested positive for saxitocin (associated with paralytic shellfish poisoning).

Beginning 11 November 2015, there has been a significant increase in reports of dead and dying Murres from the northern Gulf of Alaska. Stranded live Murres have been found on roads and trails many miles inland (Wasilla, Palmer, Talkeetna, Sutton, etc.). Based on information received in the past two weeks, approximately 500 dead Murres have been recorded on beaches in the Gulf of Alaska. Additionally, observations of “100s of Murres” in PWS are being reported in large floating aggregations (raft of Murres) and appear lethargic and exhibit minimal avoidance behavior. At this time we do not have an estimate of total mortality, nor do we have a clear picture of what age groups have been most affected (adults, sub-adults, juveniles).

We anticipate the die-off events to continue into the winter and spring and are developing an aerial beached bird survey protocol to document the geographic extent and duration of this seabird mortality event. With internal and external partners, we hope to conduct beached bird surveys (aerial, boat-based) with some intensive sampling areas to collect demographic data (age, sex) and body condition. Overall, we would like to use survey data and demographic information to extrapolate an estimate of total mortality and to model the impact to Alaska’s Murre populations, and how this might affect future trends.

For further information, contact Kathy Kuletz, Wildlife Biologist Seabird Specialist, at kathy_kuletz@fws.gov, or (907) 786-3453.