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Copper River In-Season Salmon Teleconference

 Date: June 5, 2025

Total Participation-24

<u>AITRC-</u>	<u>NPS-</u>	<u>ADF&G-</u>	<u>OSM-</u>	<u>PWSSC-</u>	<u>Tribes/Subsistence</u>
Jim Simon	Barbara Cellarius	Tracy Hansen-	Nissa Pilcher	Peter Rand	<u>Users-</u>
Deanna Kosbruk	Amber Cohen	Glennallen Office	Brooke McDavid	Jasmine Becker	Matt Piche
Kelsey Stanbro		Jeremy Botz-	Kevin Foley		Marce Simeon
Dan Gorze		Cordova Office			Sarah Devens
Alex Niepoth		Heather Scannell-			Corina Ewan
David Miller		Cordova Office			Anne Thomas
Bailey Roberts					Evelyn Beeter
Bella Ranck					M. Starr Knighten

Meeting Purpose

The teleconference brings together fisheries biologists, resource managers, and subsistence users to share updates on current salmon run conditions, fishery operations, and community harvest observations across the Copper River drainage.

Key Updates

1. Fisheries Reports

Commercial Fishery Update – Jeremy Botz (ADFG)

- Four commercial fishing periods have been reported, and the fifth is currently happening
- The 2025 commercial fishing season commenced under challenging conditions, owing to persistent stormy weather in the Gulf, which significantly impacted fishing effort and harvest outcomes.

Harvest Summary:

- Total to date: ~174,000 sockeye, ~3,000 Chinook
- Exception: The Saturday fishery before the meeting saw improved weather and higher catch rates.

- Fourth period (Monday): Severe weather caused half the fleet to stay in port, resulting in substantially reduced harvest, despite increased fishing time.

Management Adjustments:

ADFG has adapted by modifying fishing times and locations:

- Delayed start times in early periods
- Offshore-only fishing (12-hour window) during the third period
- Expanded Chinook inside closure area to reduce harvest pressure

Run Outlook:

- Sockeye run appears smaller than forecast.
- Sonar data is tracking just ahead of the cumulative average but suggests a run size in line with historically lower years.
- Variability in management and environmental conditions creates uncertainty in predictions.

Approach:

ADFG continues to adopt a conservative management approach, prioritizing the long-term sustainability of the run based on early indicators and limited data available so far.

Sport, Personal Use, and Subsistence Fisheries Update- Tracy Hansen – ADFG, Area Management Biologist (Glennallen)

- Tracy thanked the group for the invitation and noted that she has taken over as the Area Management Biologist following Mark Somerville's retirement in April 2025.
- She manages sport fisheries, the Chitina Subdistrict personal use fishery, and upriver state subsistence fisheries in the Glennallen area.

Sonar and Run Timing

- Sonar counts between May 26 and June 1 were higher than expected, prompting an increase in fishing time for the Chitina personal use dipnet fishery.
- Run timing appears on schedule, with fish entering rivers in multiple locations.

Fishery Openings- Chitina Subdistrict Personal Use Fishery

- An Emergency Order (EO) advisory has been released, adding 18 hours to the PU Fishery, which will now open on Wednesday, June 11, at 6 PM and remain open through Sunday at midnight.

State Subsistence Fishery

- Opened Sunday, June 1 (per regulation) and will remain open through September 30.
- ~200 permits issued to date — slightly low, possibly due to perceptions of late runs in recent years.

Observations from the Field

- Enforcement reports indicate low catch rates in fish wheels above the Chitina Bridge.
- Boat dipnetting saw moderate success; very few Chinook harvests were observed.

Gulkana River King Salmon Counting Tower

Installed last weekend, the counts began on Monday at 6 AM.

- Sockeyes have been observed passing the tower; no Chinook yet.

Anecdotal reports of:

- Chinook salmon entering the lower Gulkana River and sockeye salmon entering the Klutina River from sports fishermen.

Sockeye Salmon Radio Telemetry Project:

- Partnership with Matt Piche (NVE) and Pete Rand (PWSSC)
- Now in its second and final year.
- ~150 sockeye tagged to date.
- Tags detected in Klutina, Tazlina, and above Gakona tracking stations.
- Fast travel times are attributed to low river flow/velocity.
- She expressed interest in hearing more firsthand observations from participants in future calls.

Tanada Creek Weir Update – Barbara Cellarius (WRST)

- The Tanada Creek Weir, located at the headwaters of the Copper River, is being operated this season as a cooperative effort between Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve (WRST) and the Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission (AITRC).
- Barbara shared that the installation of the weir was completed earlier this week through the joint efforts of both AITRC and NPS staff.
- The program is currently in a transition phase, with AITRC expected to take on a larger leadership role in operations and data collection as the season progresses.

- Barbara deferred to Dan Gorze for further details about AITRC's summer plans and expanded involvement with the weir.

2. Permitting & Research

Permitting and Staff Update – Amber Cohen (WRST):

Permitting Overview

- Permit issuance began: First week of May
- First two weeks: 77 total permits issued (Upper Copper River District)

By May 31:

- Total permits issued: 243
 - Glennallen Subdistrict: 127
 - Chitina Subdistrict: 116

Since June 1:

- Approx. 30 additional permits issued
- Total permits now over 270 and increasing

Permit Access and Outreach

- Permit distribution has expanded beyond the visitor center to include in-person outreach at Chitina and McCarthy, ensuring accessibility for communities distant from the park's main offices.
- Visitor Center staff have been praised for effectively meeting public needs and ensuring a smooth permitting process.

Community and Participation Observations

- There appears to be increased interest in early-season fishing, with strong engagement from subsistence users.

Staffing Update

- Dave Sarafin, longtime WRST fisheries biologist, officially retired on Friday, May 30.
- The team and community will deeply feel Dave's absence.
- In the future, the fisheries program will be coordinated by:
 - Barbara Cellarius
 - Benjamin Pister

- Amber Cohen

Radio Tagging & Field Research Update – Peter Rand (Prince William Sound Science Center)

- Peter Rand and Jasmine Becker, along with several field crew members, are conducting summer research throughout the Copper River watershed, with a focus on radio telemetry studies in coordination with Tracy Hansen (ADFG) and Matt Piche (Native Village of Eyak).

Current Research Efforts

- Radio Telemetry Study:
 - Community members are encouraged to report sightings of radio-tagged fish and return any recovered tags.
 - A radio receiver was recently installed in the upper part of the Tazlina River near the lake outlet.
 - The river is currently flowing at very low levels, consistent with other observations throughout the region.

Field Surveys:

- Ongoing surveys in the Tanada and Copper Lake systems are tracking the movement of radio-tagged fish.
- Crews will be deployed in August to continue monitoring.
- Weir Support – Long Lake (Chitina Tributary)
 - The Long Lake weir, a historically late-run sockeye population site, is now operated by local landowners with technical support from the Science Center.
 - The Park Service previously managed this site.
 - The Science Center will assist with operations and may bring in staff from the Watershed Stewardship Program in August to support fieldwork.
 - Fish typically arrive in August, and maintaining this weir is a key goal for the summer season.
 - River conditions are lower than usual.

Tanada Creek Weir Operations & Observations – Daniel Gorze (AITRC)

- **Tanada Creek Weir Setup:**

Dan reported that he has spent the past two seasons training under Dave Sarafin on weir setup and operation.

This season, AITRC and NPS successfully collaborated to install the Tanada Creek weir, which was made fish-tight two days ago and is now actively recording fish passage.

- **Field Observation – Chitina Subdistrict:**

Dan shared anecdotal reports from four dipnetters fishing in the Chitina Subdistrict last weekend.

- Each individual reportedly caught 25 sockeye and one king salmon within two hours.

- He noted this unusual consistency across participants, suggesting a strong pulse or high catchability event.

Salmon Health and Genetics Sampling Update – Kelsey Stanbro (AITRC Ecologist)

Salmon Health Project

- AITRC is continuing the Salmon Health Project this season.

Weekly goal:

- 6 sockeye samples
- As many Chinook (king) salmon samples as possible
- Sampling will take place in:
 - Chitina Subdistrict
 - Glennallen Subdistrict
 - Upper Copper River
- Fishery Technicians:
 - Bella Ranck (present at meeting)
 - Mia Bobowski
- Note: Sampling is intensive, involving internal examination, but only a 1x1-inch tail muscle sample is removed; fillets are otherwise intact.
- Community members and harvesters are encouraged to volunteer or share caught fish for sampling.

Genetic Sampling – Personal Use Fishery

- AITRC is assisting with 190 weekly genetic samples in collaboration with Andy Barclay (ADFG Genetics Lab).
- Samples are needed from personal use fishers, especially in the Chitina area.
- Contact info for technicians was shared via Zoom chat; interested participants are encouraged to reach out.

Upper River Tagging & Monitoring Update – Matt Piche- NVE

Fish Wheel Operations

- Baird Canyon and Canyon Creek fish wheels were deployed in early May.
- Zero catch days initially at both sites, suggesting sampling began before major run entry.
- Approx. 950 Chinook salmon tagged at Baird Canyon to date.
- Canyon Creek catch rates are historically low, but two tagged recaptures made it to the site in ~5 days, indicating early movement through the system.

Observations

- Fish at Canyon Creek appear more dispersed, possibly due to wider river conditions compared to the narrower canyon area at Baird.
- Planning to install sonar at Canyon Creek to assess river-wide distribution and improve sampling accuracy.
- Actively relocating fish wheels at Canyon Creek to identify a more representative catch location.

Sockeye Radio Tagging

- 151 sockeyes tagged at Baird Canyon.
- Tagged fish are moving rapidly upriver, likely aided by the current low water flow conditions.

Genetic Study

- A feasibility study is underway in partnership with the Wild Salmon Center to identify run timing genetic markers in Chinook.
- The goal is to expand this into a full-scale genetic monitoring project over the coming years.

Next Steps

- Awaiting weather window to travel to the field site and install sonar equipment.
- Will continue tagging, tracking, and data collection efforts throughout the season.

3. Subsistence User Reports

Fish Wheel Update – Chitina Area- Corina Ewan- NVC

- Fish wheel operations in the Chitina area have been significantly impacted due to extremely low water levels.
- One fish wheel has already sustained damage, and another is experiencing mechanical and access issues.
- The river's main channel has shifted away from the traditional bank, making it difficult to access sufficient depth for proper fish wheel operation.
- Attempts to extend reach into deeper water have proven challenging, with one wheel requiring a significant structural extension to function correctly.
- The situation is challenging due to the historic relocation of fish wheel sites to the Five Mile Airport area, which is now suffering from poor river alignment and access.
- As a result, the community is struggling to catch fish at expected rates, even though fish are likely passing through the system.
- “We’re hurting a little bit down in the Chitina area... and that’s where it’s hurting.”

Fish Wheel Update – Copper Center Area- M. Starr Knighten

- Starr reported that while she has not personally been to the fish wheel, her family is currently operating one in the Copper Center area.
- A strong pulse of salmon was observed entering the fish wheels around Friday or Saturday (early June).
- It was described as a “very nice run” at that time.
- No current update yet on whether catch rates have slowed since that initial pulse.
- The fish wheel has been operating since May 21.
- While exact daily harvest numbers are not confirmed through paperwork, family reports indicate consistent catches of ~200 fish per day for at least three consecutive days—likely Saturday, Sunday, and Monday of the prior week.

- No current updates are available beyond Tuesday.

Additional Fish Wheel Conditions – Dean Barlip (NVC)

- Confirmed that water levels remain very low in the Chitina area.
- A few individuals have attempted to set up fish wheels, and while some fish have been caught, the overall success has been limited.
- The primary current has shifted toward the center of the river, making it difficult for wheels near the Five Mile area to operate effectively.
- Current conditions are resulting in low catch rates and poor fishing success in the traditional fishing zones near Chitina.

Community Fish Wheel Operations – Marce Simeon- Native Village of Tazlina

- The Native Village of Tazlina has deployed two community fish wheels for the 2025 fishing season.
- Nine tribal member slots are available; four have already been claimed.
- A new reporting requirement has been implemented for community wheel users to collect data and metrics on wheel use and effectiveness. This will help assess the overall benefits to tribal and community members.

Harvest Report

- One tribal member used the community wheel on Monday, Tuesday, and today, successfully harvesting:
 - 3 king salmon
 - 36 sockeye salmon
- The second wheel was installed today and is already reserved by multiple individuals through July.
- Priority is given to tribal members, with additional availability for other community members.

Collaboration and Distribution

- The Native Village of Tazlina is working closely with Kelsey Stanbro and the AITRC Salmon Health Project, who will utilize one of the community wheels next week for research purposes.
- Community distributions of harvested salmon will begin tomorrow, with elders and tribal members receiving a filet or whole salmon to start the season.

Closing Remarks:

- While the season has not started as strongly as in some other areas (e.g., below Chitina), there is a sense of hope and optimism.
- The village is grateful for a promising start and looks forward to a productive and community-focused fishing season.

Fish Wheel and Harvest Update – Deanna Kosbruk (Tribal Citizen of Gulkana Village)

- Deanna reported on fish wheel activity at her family's camp in Gulkana Village.
- The wheel has been consistently producing an average of 8 to 12 fish per day.
- During one evening of processing, she noted that the quality of the fish was excellent:
 - Meat was firm and intact, unlike past years when fish were reported to have soft or deteriorating flesh.
 - Few parasites were observed.
- River conditions at the Gulkana fish camp are favorable, described as neither too high nor too low, providing steady flow for fish wheel operation.
- Overall, the early-season observations are encouraging for both fish quality and river conditions in the Gulkana area.

Fish Wheel Status – Kelsey Stanbro (AITRC)- Mentasta Area

- Kelsey shared an update from Honalee Sanford (Mentasta Traditional Council), received just before the meeting.
- No fish wheel has been installed yet in the Mentasta area.
- The delay is not due to water conditions, but rather mechanical issues with the wheel itself that require repair.
- As of this report, no fishing activity has been confirmed in the Mentasta region.


Trail Conditions & Community Update – M. Starr Knighten- Tanada Creek Area

- A group traveled the trail to Tanada Creek and Batzulnetas on Friday.
- The trail conditions were reported as dry and not very muddy, attributed to very low snowpack this year.
- No significant updates on river conditions were shared during the report.
- The speaker followed up with Kathryn Martin for additional information, but as of the meeting, she reported no updates at this time.

Subsistence Fishing Report – Matt Piche- Cordova Area

- Participation in the federally qualified subsistence fishery in Cordova is increasing, with the speaker noting it is the highest turnout observed so far, which is encouraging for local engagement.
- On June 1 (opening day):
 - At midnight, four fishers were present.
 - By 4:00 AM, that number had grown to approximately 13 people.
- The speaker fished for 9 hours and harvested five sockeye salmon, which was consistent with what others were experiencing—low catch rates overall.
- Despite the low numbers, community members expressed enthusiasm just to be participating and having the opportunity to fish.
- Location-specific factors may influence the lower catch, but overall morale remains positive.

Closing Notes

- Next Teleconference:  June 12, 2025, at 11 am
- The June 19th Teleconference is cancelled due to a new federal holiday, and our partners will have the day off.
- Final wrap-up call scheduled for August 28, 2025.
 - More discussion is needed, but AITRC and NPS would like to gather for the last teleconference.
- Calendar invites and Zoom links are available upon request; please get in touch with Deanna Kosbruk from AITRC.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85013942721>

Meeting ID: 850 1394 2721