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Weekly Copper River Salmon In-Season Teleconferences
Thursday, July 11, 2024, 11 AM

Zoom meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87998112979?pwd=aulvIcrVOfaBiS4W24MQrwlZQhcAxM.1>

Meeting ID: 879 9811 2979 **Passcode:** 380518

Call in at 1-719-358-4580

About:

These calls aim to share and learn from others' observations about Copper River salmon harvests and returns during the fishing season, river conditions, and other factors that may affect harvests and returns.

Participants Identified (14 total):

- *AITRC Staff:* Deanna Kosbruk, Jim Simon, Hannah Bengtson
- *WRST Staff:* Barbara Cellarius, Dave Sarafin, Mark Miller
- *ADFG In-Season Managers:* Mark Somerville (Glennallen Area Office), Jeremy Botz (Prince William Sound Area Office)
- *CRNA:* Vincent Komok
- *CRWP:* Kate Morse
- *Public:* Tursy Smelcer (Kluti Kaah), Becky Schwanke (Tazlina), Kirk Wilson Sr. (Tolsona Lake, Crosswinds Lake), Sarah Devins (Kluti Kaah)

Introduction and Ground rules:

- Deanna Kosbruk welcomed everyone to the teleconference and thanked them for calling in and attending.
- Deanna Kosbruk stated the purpose is to provide a venue for Copper River subsistence fishers to share and learn from others' observations about Copper River salmon harvests and returns during the fishing season, river conditions, and other factors that may affect harvests and returns.
- Barbara Cellarius introduced herself and reviewed the "ground rules" for the conversation.
 - Be polite, respectful, and considerate of others
 - Wait for your turn to speak
 - Introduce yourself with your name and where you fish as you start speaking
 - Be patient and don't interrupt even if you strongly disagree with what's being said.
 - Put your phone or computer on mute when you are not speaking
 - Everyone who wishes to speak will be allowed to do so before someone speaks for a second time.

Agency Updates:

Jeremy Botz, ADF&G Gillnet Area Management Biologist: This is Jeremy; for my update, the Miles Lake sonar daily passage counts here over more than a week now have been tracking well ahead of the anticipated return for this period at the end of June. We're projecting up to above 900,000 for the total in-river passage. The commercial fishery cumulative harvest is about 1.2 million sockeye salmon, 8,700 Chinook, and about 31,000 chum salmon.

Dave Sarafin, Fisheries Biologist Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve: Good morning. The Tanada Weir is up and running. We got it in on June 25. And the count is passing some sockeye; we're at 727 so far. That's kind of a little bit behind what last year was. So, it's a slower start than a lot of the years. The water level has been dropping through the past couple of weeks. It is still allowing fish passage there. So that's the main thing that's taken up a lot of my time the past few weeks: getting the crew up and running, installing the weir, and monitoring all the fish numbers in the river. Thank you, that is all I have for now.

Deanna Kosbruk: I know that Pete Rand usually reminds us that if anyone catches a fish with a tracker on it, call ADF&G and bring it in so he can continue his research and study.

Participant updates (subsistence users):

Crosswinds and Tolsona subsistence area and hatchery.

Kirk Wilson Sr., Tonsina Crosswinds area subsistence user: I wonder if anybody's really paying attention to what's going on up here at this hatchery on the Gulkana. It is my observation at Crosswinds late this year that there are hardly any minnows going out of the lake whatsoever. That's something we're going to notice down the track in the long run. I called to find out about how many minnows they were putting into Crosswinds now because when they started this thing, they geared up to put 10 million fry in there every year, 10 million at Paxton, and 10 million at Summit. And they put 2 million at Crosswinds this year, 2 million at Summit, and 2 million at Paxson. So that's a lot less fish than we've seen in the past. It's noticeable over there. When I'm at Crosswinds, usually you have an out-migration of minnows, and it's a lot like the ocean out there. There are all kinds of birds feeding on the minnows and the lake trout are going crazy. And that's just not happening. If they were putting 10 million in and they're putting 2 million in now, when they put 10 million in, about 8 million disappeared into the lake. So, when they put 2 million in, the disappearance percentage will be higher because there's just a lot less food there. I notice that in the lake trout because a lot of the lake trout are getting skinny over there. But as subsistence users, Crosswinds Lake at one time was pumping out some major red salmon it was not long ago that all of us can remember those great big fish coming in. It's not looking very good. Something needs to change there to make things better if we can. If you are familiar with what's going on with the hatchery, I'm certainly willing to talk to you about it.

Barbara Cellarius: Kirk, is this a question for one of the area biologists?

Kirk Wilson Sr.: No, this is just an observation of what I'm seeing there. The question is, what are we going to do? Because if they are only getting that many fish at the hatchery, the spawning beds are likely getting the same amount of fish going there, which is way less than we have had in the past. If that continues, we will not be producing the salmon that we used to.

Dave Sarafin to Kirk Wilson Sr.: I could get back to you, Kirk, a little on that. So, my best observations are up at Tanada Creek. We had the third-highest run we ever documented two years ago, but we also had some weaker runs. Last year, this was roughly 50% of our average. Maybe we've had some later returning fish, much later returning fish. So, it's hard to know on Crosswind, I think the Copper has some very different, maybe regional patterns and what is going on with the escapement and the survival. I know Tanada is very subject to droughts. In particular, we've had some years where that creek went dry right when the Smolt was going out, and the returning adults we're trying to get in. Then we have some glacial systems that are stabilized by the glacial flow from droughts anyway. So, there's a lot. But as far as information on how much Crosswinds and hatchery fish translate to the Copper in general, I need a better solid feel on that. But it's good to hear your information from that area, and it'd be nice to have more monitoring throughout the government spawning systems.

Kirk Wilson Sr. to Dave Sarafin: One thing that's for certain that we're looking at here on Gulkana River it's the only place these hatchery fish are. We should be able to get a pretty good vision of what's going on because they have their people working on these things. And if the fish are so low up there. I go and see that the Klutina has more fishing ever than, and we all know now that the Klutina is one of our richest fisheries. And what's happening is all these fishermen have been fishing around everywhere else and are all down fishing on the Klutina. Now, it seems to be our major need to start taking and looking at what's going on there (Gulkana hatchery). Because we are targeting wild fish when we go fish in the Klutina. And I mean, that's what's very important to us, which is wild fish. I mean, these hatchery fish are great. And they can increase our numbers if they can produce the fish up there. But when they quit producing up there, we're not only losing all those fish that's coming back to them, but these people are also starting to hit these wild fish a lot harder than they used to. So, it's just an observation. It's something that we all need to be looking a little bit closer at as we go forward.

Jeremy Botz to Kirk Wilson Sr.: Yeah, I just had some numbers in front of me. And just to kind of put things in context for Gulkana they've been short on the broodstock goals for coming up on almost a decade now. Since you know about 2015, 2016 is when we really started to see a drop, the range of 50,000 to 70,000, and then it just dropped off, you know, 40,000 to 32,000. And then, in recent years, we've kind of been averaging more like 16,000 fish utilized for broods. That's been the near-term pattern, So, that translates to those reduced releases you're talking about.

Kirk Wilson Sr. to Jeremy Botz: I don't know if it was you or somebody else I talked to down at Prince William Sound Aquaculture, but they told me they only put 2 million fish in at Crosswinds. 2 million Paxton and Summit got 2 million. That's a long way off from 16 million.

Jeremy Botz to Kirk Wilson Sr.: The other thing to look at here is the total run estimate. And since 2017, we've been at about an average of about 57,000. He (Kirk) talked about, you know, Gulkana Hatchery

fish getting through multiple fisheries and all the way up to the hatchery. Yeah, it's not a huge surprise that they're not getting a lot of fish for brood stock with runs that size.

Tonsina to Chitina and Cordova subsistence use area.

Mark Somerville, Chitina subsistence area user: Yeah, so, flip my hat around. As far as it goes for harvests, it's been picking up a little bit at our fishwheel in Chitina. The water level drops slow us down, though. It's not a matter of fish issues, but we've been having to move our wheel around a little bit to catch a decent current to pick fish up, but we're still getting 15 to 30 a day, depending on what's happening on each day, and how hard we fish the wheel. So, it's about the same, nothing different. I have heard from other people fishing wheels down there and from dip netters that it's all picking up right now. Radio telemetry for sockeye showed us that a large group of fish have been holding up below the canyon and are moving through now, upwards of a couple of 100,000 fish below Tonsina, so it's of interest. Those fish should be moving up through all the fisheries. I would expect that this week. Most fishwheels upriver should start to see a little bit better fishing, and then we'll see if that keeps building over the next couple of weeks.

Then, as far as updates on things, Jeremy gave an update, I came on a little late, but... sonar numbers are coming up here. We'll see a big bump of fish through late this year that should be coming up the river here and another two to three weeks later. That'll add a bit of influx to fishing. I think those fish are primarily from the lower Copper and Klutina, maybe Tazlina, maybe Tonsina sockeye, and Gulkana sockeye as well; they should be going up into the Gulkana, so that'll be good to see a good late run going up there this year. And hopefully, a few extra hatchery fish. And then Kirk, the hatchery operator had pretty bad IHN issues this year, too. They had a low incubation rate and lost a substantial number of fish to IHN this year. They lost two or three incubators, and then I believe they lost at least one maybe two raceways of fish which is a big, which is a big deal because each raceway holds about five incubators worth of fish. So that's one of the reasons for the extremely low release rates that they had this year. That's all I got.

Tursy Smelcer, Chitina and Kluti Kaah area subsistence user: I haven't been out; I've just been hearing. I haven't gotten any salmon this last weekend, and the week before, we canned on the Fourth of July. My kids brought some Kasilof salmon up for smoke strips, and they make really good, dry, dry, dry strips. I've been hearing really small salmon have been coming up. They're smaller than usual up here, also. A friend told me they got 20 Salmon this morning, and they were all very small. And I talked to Bonnie this morning and asked her how she was doing on her fish. And she said they're catching it, but they're small. So, hopefully, we get some. I wish Karen were on; she would probably tell us where the fish are going because she knows all the directions, and I'm unfamiliar with the smaller ones and where they're heading. I was thinking maybe a further up. They're trying to get upriver. There's salmon that go to every tributary. And I forget where it is; the little ones are from there. It's not unusual to have those little ones. But there's they're all little she said. So, I'm trying to get some here soon, too. But the late run what Mr. Somerville said, three to four weeks, that's going to be a pretty late run. Usually, our fishing is over by August 1. But I'm looking forward to the late run. It is almost like the hatchery fish that comes in big, very crazy fish that is very energetic. But I'm looking forward to those. I love getting the first fish of the year and the last fish of the year. So, I'm happy. I'll be back. I'll be gone next week. I've

got a wedding. I'm preparing for my granddaughter. She's getting married on the 27th. So, I'm going to be pretty busy that week. I won't be doing any salmon and probably won't be checking on it, either. So, I probably won't make it to the next week's Fishery report. Thank you.

Kate Morse, Cordova area subsistence user: Good morning. Thank you. Today, I'm just listening and hearing about upriver perspectives and experiences. Unfortunately, I have not been fishing, so I have nothing to report. I do know that when my husband did go out, we tended to think we were targeting more local stocks because we're at the mouth of the Eyak River. We had some smaller fish, but that was a couple of weeks ago, and I haven't been out recently.

Tonsina to Gakona subsistence use area.

Barbara Cellarius, Tazlina area subsistence user: This is Barbara Cellarius. And I've just talked to a couple of people. One of my colleagues did get about 50 fish in Tazlina one day. He said most of those majority were sockeye; he released, I think, about three Chinook. I also went down to my neighborhood in Silver Springs last night. It's a very small report, but yesterday afternoon, they had got five fish, which isn't bad for an afternoon. That's what I have. Thanks.

Sarah Devins, Tazlina area subsistence user: The village of Kluti Kaah doesn't have a wheel community. But I have heard that in Tazlina, we've been running the family wheel, and we haven't caught very much in the past few days, maybe two or something like that. It's around the village that there are not very many fish to see right now. But most of the people, it seems, are waiting; they like the first run, and then they like the last run. So, it kind of goes out in the middle around here for us.

Deanna Kosbruk, Gulkana area subsistence user: I'll give a quick little update for Gulkana. My parents and my brother have a fishwheel there. And they're only seeing five to seven fish a day. And it's just in the morning that they're catching those. So that's all I have for Gulkana.

Batzulnetas, Nebesna, Salana, Chistochina subsistence use area **No Reports**

Closing remarks, follow-up, and concerns:

The next meeting is on July 18th over Zoom or in the AITRC building.

Deanna Kosbruk: Opened the floor up to questions for area biologists or managers and comments

Tursy Smelcer: It sounds like the rivers are going down a little at a time, so maybe it might get better. And maybe next week might be a little better attendance too, so something to report. If you don't have anything to report, they probably won't show up. You know? I don't know, just for Chistochina, I haven't heard anybody, and I haven't seen anything from that way either usually a year or something a little something they get. So maybe they're not making their meat needs down that way and that's very important that they have their needs up that that way met.

Kirk Wilson Sr.: Yeah, I have something to say about those little fish—the first 15 years I worked at the Gulkana and the Klutina. I couldn't tell you what a Jack King looked like. About 15 years ago, they started showing up in the Gulkana. I never fished the Klutina much after that, but on the Gulkana, they started showing up there. And in the fishwheel, too, we were catching them. I don't remember in the first 15 years I was here catching those little Jack Kings in the fishwheel either. So, something is going on there. I don't know what it is. But I know that quite a bit of them are going up the Gulkana River. Thank you.

Jim Simon: Hi, thank you. Jim Simon, consultant with AITRC, grew up in Little Nelchina Basin. I have a question for Jeremy if he's still on. I'm wondering about this estimate of perhaps 100 Chinook salmon that could be caught in a commercial 48-hour period by opening up inside the barrier islands of the Chinook area. How many of those estimated 100 Chinook would go to the Upper Copper River? Or are those mostly Delta? Copper River Delta stocks? Thank you.

Jeremy Botz to Jim Simon: Yeah, thanks. Thanks for that question, Jim. We don't have any Chinook Salmon stocks in the Copper River Delta. So, the nearshore fishery reports I'm getting is that very few Chinook salmon are being harvested anymore. But we have, for the last few weeks, we've had an offshore fishery weighed out in the district. And I think a lot of those a lot of those Chinook are coming from that fishery. We'll probably have some genetics that, hopefully, will be run in the postseason. You know, they could be from probably hatchery programs in Southeast BC, Washington, Oregon, in feeder fish would be, a large, large part of that, that 100 fish you're talking about.

Jim Simon to Jeremy Botz: Okay, thank you. It's obvious to you, Jeremy. But, with closures to Chinook retention in the personal use fishery and Chitina and the state subsistence fishery and Glennallen sub-district. It just begs the question of how the mixed stock fishery policy is being utilized to ensure the conservation of those wild Chinook resources and Upper Copper. I appreciate you saying that those are fish from somewhere else, likely, although those places also seem to have some conservation issues.

Jeremy Botz to Jim Simon: Yeah, I mean, we're talking about an incredibly low number for the size of that fishery. Another point to make is that at least today, any Chinook salmon that would be entering the Copper right now are likely to be from the Upper Copper. We're looking at stocks that would reach the Upper Copper subsistence fisheries in August. As far as kind of comparing things to what's happening upriver, you'd want to kind of tie those to management actions that were taken close to a month ago on the commercial fishery.

Jim Simon to Jeremy Botz: Thank you, Jeremy. And a follow-up that is related to the commercial catch so far. What proportion of those Sockeye are the one point some odd million Sockeye, and what proportion of those are hatchery stocks in that catch?

Jeremy Botz to Jim Simon: I'll have numbers postseason for you when we're adding things up for our annual reports and getting ready for the Board of Fish. I can say that we've had some pretty high contributions of sockeye salmon returning to our Main Bay Hatchery in Western Prince William Sound down in the Copper River commercial fishery, upwards of 50%, between 30 and 50%, during a couple of periods here recently, there was a large element of traveling fish that were, were caught in that offshore fishery.

Jim Simon to Jeremy Botz: Great, thank you, Jeremy. That's how it's supposed to work.

Jeremy Botz to Jim Simon: The Gulf of Canada has made a relatively small contribution so far, and I should also cover that. The results for those are lagging a couple of weeks. We should have some more up-to-date results on the Canadian contributions to the commercial here in short order. They have those audits that need to be prepped, and then they're sent up to Fairbanks to be right under a scanning electron microscope. And just that it's taken a little bit of time to get the turnaround on those.

Tursy Smelcer: I've got one more thing I forgot to mention. One of the elders has a wheel here in Copper Center, and I visit him all the time. He said in mid-June, he caught a lingcod in his fishwheel. He said he's never seen anything like that before. He didn't know what to think about it. Do lingcod live in freshwater? And they probably could; salmon could adapt, so could they. But he had a concern... do lingcod eat salmon? Another thing is if lingcod is eating the salmon, he said there will be a shortage of our salmon here really soon. Mark, maybe you could comment on something like that. Tell me what's going on?

Mark Somerville to Tursy Smelcer: Yeah, I'm not going to try and dispute the elders. What he's catching there and stuff. But I'd be pretty shocked if we had lingcod this far upriver there. They are a saltwater fish. Maybe it could have happened. I don't know. It would be kind of a very unique thing. I don't think we have to be concerned about lingcod moving into the Copper River, though, in any sort of numbers. So yeah, I don't think that's a concern for our fisheries up here. I'd like to see the fish.

Deanna Kosbruk: If you see anything abnormal, just take a picture and share it with us. You can send it to connect@ahnatribal.org

Dave Sarafin to Tursy Smelcer: Hey, this is Dave. Just to get back to Tursy, I would guess there's a chance it was a burbot. We do get some burbot-caught fishwheels periodically, and those are actually referred to as freshwater lingcod. So that's kind of what was seen, and that's a natural occurrence we've had for years.

Tursy Smelcer to Dave Sarafin: He fishes for lingcod; I mean burbot. So, he would know what it looked like. But he was pretty sure it was a lingcod and said it was really ugly. I'll talk with him. I really wish he told me about it a few days later, and I didn't even think about having him, asking him if he saved it or something or gave it away. But I'm definitely going to talk to him about saving, so at least call me right away so I can take a picture of it for future reference anyway, you know.

Dave Sarafin to Tursy Smelcer: Thanks for the information. They say when fish spend time in glacial water, they totally change their coloration from what they might be in clearwater lakes. But yeah, it would be interesting to hear more feedback; you might hear about it. Thank you.

Deanna Kosbruk: Thank you. Are there others who want to share an update or have questions? So, I'm not seeing any. This is a reminder that this is a weekly call every Thursday at 11 am. Our minutes are posted on our website. It's Ahtnatribal.org. At the top, you'll see the different tabs and "Teleconference." If you click on that, it'll take you to all the minutes and updates, the next meeting

date and time. It also has the Zoom link. And again, if you see anything abnormal you're unsure about, please take a picture and send it to connect@ahtnatribal.org. And you can bring it to Fish and Game or call them. Again, contact the Alaska Department of Fish and Game if you catch a fish with a tracker on it. I'd like to thank everyone who's called in and joined, shared, asked questions, and kept the conversation going. It was helpful. And I know it's a busy time, and we appreciate you guys taking the time out of your day and participating. Thank you.

Thanks all around, and the call ended.