

Outreach and Engagement Planning on Chum Salmon Bycatch

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1 Introduction

The Council is considering new management approaches to reduce the bycatch of chum salmon originating from Western Alaska river systems in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. This issue is being considered in light of the recent declines in Western Alaska chum salmon abundance. Chum salmon bycatch management is an important issue to rural and Alaska Native communities, tribes, subsistence users, and commercial fishermen. This paper provides information on Council staff’s recent outreach and engagement efforts related to salmon bycatch, and it conveys how staff are planning to move forward with outreach and engagement, consistent with recent efforts. This document also serves as a means for Council discussion and public input on this issue.

2 Background

The Council may direct staff to pursue outreach and engagement efforts with rural and Alaska Native communities at any time as it develops fishery management actions for chum salmon bycatch and other issues. Outreach and engagement efforts must be balanced with staff analytical workload and funding constraints. Staff conceptualizes outreach and engagement as both “informal” and “formal” opportunities. “Informal” refers to staff responding to questions and inquiries from the public, meetings with members of the public to discuss specific questions on the analysis or Council process more broadly, written updates to the Council webpage, among others. “Formal” refers to staff presentations and availability to answer questions from management bodies, in-community visits, invited participation in conferences or summits, among others. These efforts occur outside of, and in addition to, any Tribal Consultation and engagement sessions held by the National Marine Fisheries Service related to salmon bycatch.

Over the last three years, the primary pathway for formal outreach and engagement on salmon bycatch has been invited staff presentations to management bodies overseeing different aspects of in-river or subsistence management including Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) under the Federal Subsistence Program, the Federal Subsistence Board, and most recently the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group.

¹ Prepared by: Kate Haapala (NPFMC).

For definition of acronyms and abbreviations, see online list: <https://www.npfmc.org/library/acronyms>

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In April 2024, some Council members reiterated their interest in community visits if staff and/or Council members were to be formally invited by tribes or a community.² The Council has previously expressed its interest in communities and tribes conveying a willingness for Council and staff to be present in their communities, based on the understanding that a tribe or members of the community have their own priority issues, an awareness that tribal and community leaders are often stretched in their capacity to engage, and some periods of the year may not be well-suited for visitors.

The Council has not received an invitation to participate in outreach and engagement trips in communities over the summer since July 2022 when the last in-community engagement trip occurred in the Norton Sound region, after the Council received a formal invitation from the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Tribal Consortium. Prior to that, the Council received an invitation from the Tanana Chief's Conference to travel to communities in June 2021, but that trip was canceled because of COVID-19 concerns.

3 Engagement with the Regional Subsistence Advisory Councils

The Council received the Initial Review analysis of the Bering Sea Chum Salmon Bycatch Draft Environmental Impact Statement in April 2024 and will review a revised analysis in February 2025. Staff are looking for the Council to provide input on whether it would like to pursue additional outreach and engagement efforts on this issue at this time.

Staff recommend the RAC meetings as a forum for outreach and engagement.³ Pursuing this approach would not inherently limit the Council from considering and/or accepting invitations for in-community visits or other events, notwithstanding staffing and funding constraints. Part of this recommendation stems from prior experience. During both the development of the analysis and after final action on Amendment 91 implementing the first Chinook salmon bycatch hard caps, RAC meetings were a forum for Council members (and staff) to engage with rural Alaskans that serve on the RAC and visit nearby communities. These trips provided an opportunity for Council and staff members to share the set of alternatives and impact analysis to-date, answer technical questions, and listen to input from the RACs and residents, which was then compiled and provided in outreach reports to the Council prior to final action.

Staff have since maintained relationships with the RACs by providing remote presentations that cover recent salmon bycatch performance in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. Staff are then available to answer any questions related to salmon bycatch, bycatch management, and the Council's process. These presentations are regularly given to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta RAC, Western Interior RAC, Eastern Interior RAC. Staff have also been asked to be available for the Seward Peninsula RAC and the Bristol Bay RAC but not as often.

If the Council would like to pursue this option, staff would first contact the RACs to understand whether they would like to add this issue to their agendas. If so, staff would recommend prioritizing in-person

² This discussion occurred under staff tasking (E-1) in April 2024. The Council received a staff presentation on options for pre-scoping outreach and engagement related to developing a Programmatic Evaluation of its fisheries management policies. That presentation was a follow-up item from the February 2024 meeting where the Council's expressed its intent to provide robust and meaningful public and tribal engagement on the development of the Programmatic Evaluation. In response to public comment at the April 2024 meeting, the Council has delayed work on the Programmatic Evaluation until it completes the Bering Sea chum salmon bycatch action.

³ There are ten RACs which meet at least twice a year to develop proposals to change Federal subsistence regulations, review proposals submitted by the public, and provide an open forum for public discussion, opinions, and concerns on any matter related to subsistence.

attendance at the following meetings which fall after the next initial review of the chum salmon bycatch analysis scheduled in February 2025:

- Eastern Interior RAC meeting on February 19 and 20, 2025 in Fairbanks
- Western Interior RAC meeting on February 25 and 26, 2025 in McGrath
- Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta RAC on March 4 and 5, 2025 in Bethel

The Council may also consider the RAC's fall 2025 meeting schedule. The Western Interior and Eastern Interior RAC fall meeting dates are not possible as they overlap with the Council's October 2025 meeting, because they are scheduled for October 7 and 8 and October 7 to 9, respectively. Staff would be available for in-person attendance in the Yukon-Delta RAC meeting because the meeting is scheduled from October 21 to 23 and would be held in either Anchorage or Bethel. Note the timing of the Council's final action on this issue is uncertain until the next review in February.

3.1.1 Next Steps

Absent additional input from the Council at this time, staff would not contact the RACs specifically about in-person salmon bycatch presentations but continue to participate remotely in the RAC meetings as requested by RAC Chairs and/or Coordinators.

If in-person attendance is recommended by the Council, following this meeting staff would reach out to the RAC Coordinators to gauge interest and/or confirm if their winter meeting agendas could accommodate the Council and staff's participation. Staff have received input from RAC members in recent years that there is interest in having Council members present so RAC members can speak directly to decision-makers. At a future Council meeting (December 2024, pending other Council scheduling and priorities) staff would bring back the input received from RAC coordinators and any other logistical information requested by the Council.

4 Points for Consideration

Below are some points for consideration in no particular order of priority.

- Not all Council members can attend outreach and engagement activities. A non-quorum of Council members (up to five members) may participate. Not all members will be available to attend outreach meetings due to scheduling, and participation will be limited by limited by available resources and funding. Ideally, there will be a minimum of two members during visits; participation will be coordinated through analytical staff, the Executive Director and Chair as in the past.
- A benefit of the RAC meetings is that there are some existing relationships, and the meetings provide a clear space and time for engagement. A shortcoming of using the RACs as a primary forum is that not all communities or tribes are represented by these bodies and the pre-determined meeting dates provide little scheduling flexibility for Council and staff.
- The Council may want to consider its goal for pursuing outreach and engagement activities at this time – to share information, seek additional input, or some other purpose.
- Related to this point, staff recommends the Council undertake this type of outreach and engagement once it has identified a Preliminary Preferred Alternative. The Council is not required to identify a Preliminary Preferred Alternative prior to recommending the publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement but it could, as a way to provide the public an

opportunity to direct focused comments on the Council's preferred course of action. Participating in outreach and engagement efforts after identifying a Preliminary Preferred Alternative would provide an opportunity for Council members to share what they are hearing from multiple other public comment opportunities, the decision-making requirements under Federal law, and staff could answer technical questions about the analysis being prepared for publication as a Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

- Regardless of whether the Council chooses to pursue outreach and engagement through the RAC meetings, in-community visits, or some other approach beyond its normal public Council process, it may wish to consider its priorities for staff time and resources.

5 Summary of Recent Outreach and Engagement Efforts

Below is a list of Council and staff outreach and engagement efforts related to salmon bycatch from 2021 to 2024, including consultation and engagement sessions under the authority of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

2021

- Tanana Chief's Conference – planned outreach trip was cancelled due to COVID-19, August 2021
- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association – presentation on inseason call, August 2021
- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association – presentation on inseason call, September 14 and 28 2021
- House Fisheries Bycatch Hearing –presentation, November 2021

2022

- National Marine Fisheries Service – Consultation and engagement session, January 2022
- Tanana Chief's Conference – Yukon Salmon Summit, March 2022
- Yukon-Delta RAC – presentation, March 2022
- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association – presentation on inseason call, July 2022
- Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Tribal Consortium – outreach and engagement trip to Norton Sound communities, July 2022
- National Marine Fisheries Service/Department of Interior – consultation and engagement session, October 5 and 7, 2024
- Western Interior RAC – presentation, October 2022
- Bristol Bay RAC—presentation, November 2022

2023

- Federal Subsistence Board – presentation, January 2023
- Eastern Interior RAC – presentation, March 2023
- Seward Peninsula RAC – presentation, March 2023
- National Marine Fisheries Service – tribal engagement session, April 2023

- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association – presentation on inseason call, July 2023
- National Marine Fisheries Service – tribal engagement session, September 2023
- Western Interior RAC – presentation, October 2023
- Bristol Bay RAC – presentation, October 2023
- Seward Peninsula RAC – written report sent, November 2023

2024

- National Marine Fisheries Service - consultation on the chum salmon bycatch analysis, March 2024
- Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group – August 14 and 28, 2024