

**YUKON-KUSKOKWIM DELTA SUBSISTENCE REGIONAL ADVISORY
COUNCIL
Meeting Minutes**

Via Teleconference Due to Covid-19
March 3-4, 2021

*These minutes are an abbreviated record of the business conducted at this meeting.
For full details, transcripts of this three day meeting are available at:
https://www.doi.gov/subsistence/library/transcripts/5-yukon_kuskokwim-delta*

Invocation

Richard Slats provided an invocation prior to the meeting.

Call to Order, Roll Call and Quorum Establishment

The meeting was called to order on Wednesday, March 3, 2021 at 9:00 a.m. Council members Raymond Oney, John Andrew, Richard Slats, and Thomas Alstrom were on teleconference. Excused absence for Council member Robert Aloysius. A quorum was established with 4 out of 5 seated Council members participating by phone. (At the time of the meeting the Council had eight vacant seats due to pending Secretarial appointments).

Attendees:

Via teleconference

- *Office of Subsistence Management, Anchorage:* Eva Patton, Pippa Kenner, Cory Graham, Tom Kron, Orville Lind
- *Federal Subsistence Board member:* Rhonda Pitka, Beaver
- *Orutsararmiut Native Council, Bethel:* Janessa Esquible, Danielle Lowry, Katie Russel
- *Kuskokwim River Intertribal Fish Commission:* Mary Peltola, Terese Schomogyi, *Bethel:* Kevin Whitworth, *McGrath*
- *Association of Village Council Presidents, Bethel:* Jennifer Hooper, Paige Jones
- *Native Community of Akiak:* Mike Williams, Moses Owens, Ivan Ivan, Robert Williams, James Nicholai
- *Organized Village of Kwethluk:* Evan Olick
- *Kwethluk Incorporated:* Chariton Epchook, Anthony Olick
- *Native Village of Alakanuk:* Gabriel Buster
- *Calista Corporation:* Mary Martinez

- *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge, Bethel*: Boyd Blihovde, Ray Born, Chris Tulik, Aaron Moses, Gary DeCossas, Matt Donald
- *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Togiak National Wildlife Refuge, Dillingham*: Kenton Moos, Andy Aderman
- *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*: Holly Carroll, *Anchorage*, Gerald Maschmann, Vince Mathews, *Fairbanks*, Frank Harris, *Kenai Field Office*, Hans Klausner, *Kodiak*
- *Bureau of Land Management, Anchorage*: Bonnie Million, Bruce Seppi
- *Bureau of Indian Affairs, Anchorage*: Glenn Chen
- *National Park Service, Anchorage* : Kim Jochum, Victoria Florey
- *Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation Bethel*: Patrick Jones, *Palmer*; Mark Burch, *Anchorage*; Todd Rinaldi, *Commercial Fisheries Division*; Ben Gray, Nicholas Smith, *Anchorage*; Jeff Estensen, Deena Jalen, Sabrina Garcia, *Fairbanks, Sportfish Division*, John Chythlook, *Subsistence Division*, Alida Trainor, David Runfola, Chris McDevitt, *Fairbanks*
- *Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association*: Serena Fitka, Catherine Moncrieff
- *North Pacific Fisheries Management Council*: Dr. Diana Stram, *Anchorage*
- *US Geological Survey Alaska Science Center*: Dr. Vanessa von Biela
- *Bering Sea Elders Group*: Melissa Johnson
- Jack Reakoff, *Wiseman*
- Bill Alstrom, *St. Mary's*
- Stanly Pete, *Nunam Iqua*
- Alissa Nadine Rogers, *Bethel*
- James Landlord, *Mountain Village*
- Carl Maxie, Sr., *Napaskiak*
- Phillip Peter, Sr. *Akiachak*

Review and Adopt Agenda

Motion by Mr. Andrew, seconded by Mr. Alstrom, to adopt the agenda as read with the following additions/changes: move NPS Individual Customary and Traditional Determination Permit Update to old business, and schedule all wildlife reports prior to discussion of Call for Wildlife Proposals. Add US Geological Survey report on Yukon Chinook Heat Stress and add North Pacific Fisheries Management Council report on Bering Sea Bycatch. The motion passed unanimously.

Review and Approve Previous Meeting Minutes

Motion by Mr. Alstrom, seconded by Mr. Andrew, to approve the October 6-7, 2020 meeting minutes. There were no edits. The motion passed unanimously.

Election of Officers

Due to the extensive vacancies, the Council decided to elect interim officers for this meeting and hold elections again at the fall meeting in anticipation of having full Council membership appointed at a later date.

Raymond Oney was elected Chair by unanimous vote.

Thomas Alstrom was elected as Vice Chair by unanimous vote.

Richard Slats was elected as Secretary by unanimous vote.

Council Member and Chair Reports

Richard Slats of Chevak reported that his community had been in lock down for a long time due to COVID-19. He had been having to conduct all meetings and business by teleconference for the many Councils, Committees and work he is involved in. Food security remains an issue of great concern for Chevak and even greater importance now with reduced cargo delivery of store bought foods to be able to get subsistence foods from the region. Climate change is causing more intense coastal storms and the lack of solid sea ice prevents the community from safely getting out to hunt for seals. Permafrost thaw is causing subsidence of the tundra and traditional berry picking areas are now becoming lowland marsh and filling in with water. Later freeze-up of lakes and rivers and later snow cover is a challenge for safely accessing subsistence resources by snow machine. They are fortunate this winter to finally get snow pack like they used to and the snow is welcomed. The snow helps greatly to travel by snow machine to the areas where they ice fish and hunt. The two rivers to the south of Chevak are very important for subsistence whitefish and pike. The snow also helps the ptarmigan and they are finally seeing ptarmigan in the area again.

Elders in Chevak have reported that the fish runs are late and low. Even Blackfish have not been at their usual abundance and the community pulled their Blackfish traps early this year. He feels the traditional knowledge of Elders is invaluable for understanding the environment and should be sought out at the outset because they know from generations of experience. Richard felt all too often researchers consult with the community as an afterthought and it should be at the forefront to help guide the research and address community concerns. He stressed that the fish are also running deeper in the water where the temperature are cooler and this may necessitate expanding the allowed depth of fishing gear.

Raymond Oney of Alakanuk reported that the community has been in lockdown due to COVID-19 and it has been very difficult on the children not to be able to have in-person schooling. And the whole community is missing the winter potlaches, drum and dance, and dogsled races they normally would have this time of year. Ray noted that it has been eerily quiet this winter without the traditional singing, drumming, or dancing and no radio announcements for community gatherings. Freight deliveries to the community have been infrequent and delayed. This makes it very difficult to get basic supplies needed and causes great hardship for those that rely on food assistance.

Ray reported that the ice on the Yukon River froze up late October / early November but then a big storm blew in and opened up the river all the way to Grayling. People were even out boating and some were able to go out onto the ocean and get a few seals at that time. Ray stressed that there has been storm after storm blowing in from the north wind this winter. He wonders what the spring will bring and hopes the salmon will return. He too like others has under ice nets for whitefish but the catch has been low so far and hopes that at least the Sheefish will pick up soon. The snow pack has been good this winter and he is hopeful there will be a good breakup this spring.

Thomas Alstrom of Alakanuk reported that he is concerned about the whitefish population. Usually his family goes to the Alakanuk Slough to catch whitefish under the ice with 3.5 inch mesh nets. They target the smaller Bering Cisco and also Broad Whitefish. But this year all the months the ice was thick enough to fish since freeze-up in late November through March they have been catching far fewer fish. Over the years they would typically catch at least 10 fish in that same area every time they checked their nets but this year were catching one or none. On the other hand Thomas did catch a bunch of Sheefish in the fall when he set his net upriver of one of the coastal creeks called BeeGees. He caught nearly 25 Sheefish in one night and was still catching them as he was cleaning the net. He highlighted that his family lived off the Sheefish over the winter and they ended up being a replacement for the Cisco and other smaller whitefish they normally would have caught.

Thomas reported that soon he would be going out to set his Blackfish traps this spring. Moose are abundant around Alakanuk and he is starting to see more hare tracks. The good snow this year has helped the hares and they seem to be recovering from the wet fall and winter storms with freezing rain the past few years.

John Andrew of Kwethluk reported that his community is struggling with the low salmon returns. Families are not getting enough to feed themselves and running out of fish before the end of the winter. John noted they hardly get any Chinook Salmon and the Chum and Sockeye Salmon were low this year too. The Chum Salmon returns were so low, families with dog mushing teams

were really struggling to feed their dogs. He highlighted that the Chinook he did catch this past year were all small Jacks. They tried fishing for more whitefish but the Humpback Whitefish in the lakes were also small and he hardly caught any Bering Cisco in the set net by his fish camp this year. The under ice fishing this winter did not produce much whitefish either. John also reported that he had to pull his Blackfish traps early because the water levels were too low.

People are running out of food – even their berries: salmon berries, blueberries and wild cranberries that they freeze for winter are running low now. John says he tries to help out by sharing the whitefish he does catch and helps take the youth out hunting for moose. They have been fortunate to catch moose and they share that with the whole community. John reported that there is little commercial trapping anymore because there is not much money in the furs, but people do still trap for beaver to have some meat on the table. They are starting to see more ptarmigan around again but still little sign of hare tracks.

The Council discussed that Bob Aloysius has been in Anchorage for health care and will be retiring from the Council at the end of his current term. They want to send a certificate of appreciation in recognition for his many years of service on the Council.

Public Comment

Alissa Nadine Rogers of Bethel reported that the snow was deep and powdery this winter. It has been dangerous crossing creeks and sloughs, difficult to tell the thickness of ice, and water was high with a lot of overflow on the upper river. She has not been able to get out ice fishing this year much herself but heard reports of lower whitefish numbers and some whitefish with apparent disease and rotting smell. They did put out more Blackfish traps this year and are looking for new areas to set traps since water levels are dropping in their usual areas due to beaver activity. River eddies are changing due to erosion and it is hard to find good fishing spots on the Kuskokwim. Alissa noted Lush fish were harder to catch this year and they are smaller in size but pike were big and plentiful. She heard reports of some diseases of whitefish and saw pictures of black discoloration on the whitefish.

Alissa reported that the fall was very wet for moose hunting and then the snow was very deep to travel to the Yukon for the winter hunt, but they did get one moose. Some communities need help to proxy hunt for moose or caribou for elders. Hares seem to be scarce, they saw little sign of tracks but more Arctic hare, which are hard to catch. Alissa reported that the ptarmigan seem to be doing better and they saw several big flocks moving through her hunting area. Overall she has been doing a lot of sharing of dry fish and trading subsistence foods this year, due to COVID-19 it has been hard for many to get out for their usual hunting and fishing this year.

Carl Maxie of Napaskiak reported that he is very concerned about the salmon and everyone needs to work together for conservation all along the river. He is also seeing more ptarmigan and would be in support of increasing the harvest limit if that population is doing better now. He also sees a need to support Elder hunts for moose and caribou so that elders have good subsistence foods to eat.

James Landlord of Mountain Village reported that the freeze up was late on the Yukon River this year. But once the ice gets to be 3 or 4 inches thick, people go right out in front of Mountain Village and set their nets. There were so many nets that he traveled upriver about five miles to find some room and caught Lush, Sheefish, and some really big pike the size of King Salmon. They also set Blackfish traps under the ice in nearby lakes and got some pretty big Blackfish. Many people did not get much salmon last year, even Chum Salmon numbers were low. James reported some had run out of moose meat this winter and were planning to go out hunting again while the season was still open. The deep snow drifts this winter has made it a challenge to travel far for hunting. James reported that he is seeing fewer snowshoe hares and little sign of their tracks but did see Arctic hares. He is pleased to be seeing more ptarmigan and people have reported seeing a couple big flocks along the road to St. Mary's.

Mike Williams of Akiak reported that he is very concerned about the very low Chinook and Chum Salmon returns on both the Yukon and the Kuskokwim Rivers this past year. He is also very concerned about climate change impacts to salmon, especially the fish die-offs from heat stress that they witnessed last year. Mike noted that the Akiak Native Community had submitted special action requests for the past 5 years requesting Federal fisheries management on the Kuskokwim. He highlighted that this year the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission has been working with the Yukon Delta Refuge Manager and would like to see Federal management again to work together on Chinook Salmon conservation and provide a Federal subsistence priority so that people have food to eat and the salmon will return for future generations.

Ivan Ivan, Vice Chief, Akiak Native Community, thanked the Council for their reports and he feels it provides a good picture of fish and wildlife throughout the region from the Yukon River to the Coast to the Kuskokwim River. Ivan expressed concern for the fish and with the decline of Chinook Salmon all the other species are becoming even more important. The ancestors always fished for Chinook Salmon and then Chum and Sockeye Salmon and then Silver Salmon. The springtime is always the hardest season, especially for the Elders when they are in need of fresh food. The fish are so important including the whitefish and pike and the Lush fish. He is concerned about not getting enough Lush fish these days. With climate change affecting freeze up and causing thin ice, they are not able to set their fish traps until around Thanksgiving time or later in December now. The fish are also essential for feeding their dog teams.

Ivan reported that the wolves have been coming closer into the community and they are concerned about their children's safety walking home at night now. The wolves are causing the moose to seek shelter near the community too.

Old Business

Kim Jochum, *National Park Service* (NPS) Subsistence Program presented a brief update on the Federal Subsistence Board action on the NPS Individual Customary and Traditional Determination Permitting process and efforts to expedite the timing of that process.

New Business

Call for Federal Wildlife Proposals

Pippa Kenner, *Office of Subsistence Management* (OSM), read the Call for Federal Wildlife Proposals. All wildlife reports were provided prior to deliberation on wildlife proposals. The Council made recommendations to submit two Federal Subsistence Wildlife Proposals as follows:

1. Increase the subsistence moose harvest quota for Unit 18 Kuskokwim hunt area Zone 1 if low river water levels prevent access to the Zone 2 moose hunt area.
2. Increase the harvest of Unit 18 remainder moose from 2 to 3 moose.

The Council also made a recommendation to submit the following Emergency Wildlife Special Action request: Increase the harvest of Unit 18 remainder moose from 2 to 3 moose.

Motion by Mr. Alstrom, seconded by Mr. Andrew, to submit a proposal for Unit 18 remainder lower Yukon moose: Increase the harvest limit of moose from 2 to 3 in Unit 18 remainder August 1 – April 30: 3 moose only one of which may be antlered. Antlered bulls may not be harvested from October 1 through November 30. Motion passed unanimously.

Justification: This request to increase the harvest limit by one additional moose in Unit 18 remainder is needed to continue subsistence uses and increased opportunity for sharing of moose throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. Increasing the harvest will help to ensure long-term sustainability of the Lower River area moose population, which is currently too high to be supported by the local environment. If this moose population is not reduced, it is at risk of crashing due to over browsing of available forage.

Additional harvest opportunity of one extra moose in Unit 18 remainder will support the Lower Yukon River communities' ability to provide not only for their own families and community, but also increase sharing opportunities with subsistence communities in other areas of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta that do not have as abundant moose population and are in need of subsistence food support. It is especially important now because low salmon returns on the Yukon and

Kuskokwim Rivers and recent closures to the harvest of Mulchatna caribou are greatly affecting the region. Expanded harvest opportunity of the super-abundant moose in the lower Yukon River will help support sharing with those in need throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region.

The Council also discussed submitting this same proposal as an Emergency Special Action request so that the harvest limit for the current moose season could be expanded to 3 moose. Motion by Mr. Oney, seconded by Mr. Alstrom, to submit a proposal the same as the above Special Action Request. Motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Mr. Oney, seconded by Mr. Andrew, to submit a proposal for Unit 18 Moose Kuskokwim Hunt Area Zone 1 and 2: If the river water levels are too low to access the Zone 2 hunt area, then: Increase the moose harvest quota in Zone 1 of the Unit 18 moose Kuskokwim Hunt Area. Motion passed unanimously.

Justification: The Council voted to submit this proposal on behalf of Kwethluk resident Cheriton Epchook. After much Council discussion with Mr. Epchook and other area residents, it became clear that in recent years the water levels in the river tributaries used to access the Zone 2 moose hunt area have often been too low to successfully reach the hunting grounds. Increasingly low snow pack winters and hot dry summers have exacerbated this challenge for local area communities to use prop boats to travel up the tributary rivers and to the foothills of the Kilbuck Mountains where the Zone 2 moose hunt area is established. When the low water conditions occur, it is imperative to provide for other subsistence opportunity. This could be achieved by expanding the moose hunt quota in Zone 1, which parallels the main stem of the Kuskokwim River and is more easily accessible by boat even at low water.

Council Charter Review

The Council discussed the challenges of the late Secretarial appointments causing many vacancies on the Council and discussed a fix by amending the charter to include language such as: “Any member of this Advisory Council may serve after the expiration of the member’s term until a successor is appointed”. Motion by Mr. Andrew, seconded by Mr. Alstrom, to support renewal of its charter with modification to add the clause for a carryover term: *any member of the advisory Council may continue to serve after the expiration of the member’s term until re-appointment or a successor is appointed.* Motion passed unanimously.

The Council discussed the critical importance of balanced membership from across the entire Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Region in order to have knowledgeable representation from across the 41 subsistence communities in the Council region on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers, Delta and the Coast and in between. Motion by Mr. Oney, seconded by Mr. Alstrom, to add a clause to the Council Charter to ensure: *appointments are made with consideration to reflect balanced*

representation on the Council from across the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. Motion passed unanimously.

Finalize FY2020 Annual Report

Motion by Mr. Andrew, seconded by Mr. Slats, to approve and finalize the Council's fiscal year 2020 Annual Report with additional detail discussed on the record at this meeting on each of the following subjects:

- Need to protect the resources for people that live in the villages who depend on them for their survival;
- Declare when there are concerns about food security or other emergencies, that they are going on as an official state of emergency and put them on the forefront of management;
- Include traditional ecological knowledge along with science studies;
- Continue monitoring Mulchatna caribou herd and other inventory and monitoring studies;
- Climate change effects on subsistence resources, subsistence activities and safe travel and possible mitigation measures;
- Effects of the pandemic on food security;
- Hardship on Council and community to participate by teleconference only – poor reception, repeated dropped calls, etc.;
- Explore the possibility of conducting meetings on Zoom; and computer resources to do that.

The motion passed unanimously.

Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program

Fisheries Biologist Corey Graham and Anthropologist Pippa Kenner with the Office of Subsistence Management provided the Council with an update on grant funding opportunity for subsistence fisheries research through the Office of Subsistence Management, Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program (FRMP). The Council also heard from principal investigators about their proposal plans and discussed submitting a letters of support.

Motion by Mr. Oney, seconded by Mr. Alstrom, to write a letter of support for three ADF&G Subsistence Division FRMP projects on the Kuskokwim and lower Yukon River. Motion passed unanimously.

Agency/Tribal/Organization Reports

- Dr. Diana Stram presented a report from North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC). The Council voted to submit a letter recommending reducing the Bering Sea trawl fisheries bycatch of Chinook and Chum salmon. Motion by Mr. Oney, seconded by Mr. Alstrom, to submit a letter to NPFMC expressing concerns about extremely low Chinook and Chum Salmon returns and need for conservation action including further

reducing Bering Sea Bycatch. The Council also voted to resubmit their 2020 letter to the NPFMC.

- Native Community of Akiak report presented by Mike Williams.
- Orutsararmiut Native Council report and Partners Program updates presented by Janessa Esquible.
- Association of Village Council Presidents report presented by Jennifer Hooper and Paige Jones.
- Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission report presented by Mary Peltola.
- Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge report presented by Boyd Blihovde.
- Togiak National Wildlife Refuge report presented by Kenton Moos and Andy Aderman.
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Wildlife Conservation reports presented by Patrick Jones, Brian Reiley, Todd Rinaldi, and Rick Merizon.
- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association report presented by Serena Fitka and Catherine Moncrieff.
- US Geological Survey, Alaska Science Center report on heat stress in Yukon River Chinook presented by Dr. Vanessa von Biela.
- 2020 Yukon River Salmon Season Preseason discussion presented by Holly Carroll, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Deena Jalen and Jeff Estensen, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.
- 2020 Kuskokwim River Salmon Preseason discussion presented by Boyd Blihovde, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mary Peltola, Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, and Nicholas Smith, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, report presented by Alida Trainor, David Runfola, and Chris McDevitt.
- Office of Subsistence Management Report presented by Orville Lind.

Motion by Mr. Alstrom, seconded by Mr. Slats, to adjourn the meeting at 5:22 p.m. on March 4. The motion passed unanimously.

Future Meeting Dates:

The Council confirmed its fall 2021 meeting to be held October 6-7, in Bethel if COVID-19 travel restrictions are lifted.

The Council selected its winter 2022 meeting to be held March 1-2 in Bethel unless lifting of COVID-19 travel restrictions allow for meeting in a non-hub rural community.

_____/signature on the original/_____

Eva Patton, Designated Federal Officer
USFWS Office of Subsistence Management

_____/signature on the original/_____

Raymond Oney, Chair
Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Subsistence Regional Advisory Council

These minutes were formally considered and approved by the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta Subsistence Regional Advisory Council at its fall 2021 meeting.

A more detailed report of this meeting, copies of the transcript, and meeting handouts are available upon request. Contact Eva Patton, Council Coordinator, toll free at 1-800-478-1456 or 907-786-3358 or, email at *eva_patton@fws.gov*