

WESTERN INTERIOR SUBSISTENCE REGIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting Minutes

Pikes Landing

Fairbanks

October 19-20, 2022

Invocation:

Don Honea provided an invocation.

Call to Order, Roll Call, and Quorum Establishment:

The meeting was called to order Wednesday, October 19, 2022, at 9:05 am. Council members Don Honea, Pollock Simon, Kevin Whitworth, Tim Gervais, Darrell Vent, and Jenny Pelkola were present in person, and Jack Reakoff was present telephonically. Member Pelkola acted as chair during the meeting as Chair Reakoff was unable to be present in person. Tommy Kriska was not present on the first day due to inclement weather and was excused. Darrel Vent was absent the second day and was excused. Rebecca Wilmarth was not present and was not excused. The Council has one vacant seat. Quorum was established with seven out of nine seated Council members present.

Attendees:

- Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA): Dr. Glenn Chen
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM): Erin Julianus, Walker Gusse, Geoff Beyersdorf; Fairbanks, Paul (Chris) McKee*, Bruce Seppi; Anchorage
- National Park Service (NPS): Matt Cameron, Marcy Okada, Mark Dowdle; Fairbanks, Eva Patton*, Will Deacy*, Dillon Patterson*, Peter Christian*; Anchorage
- Office of Subsistence Management (OSM): Ann (Liz) Williams, Cory Graham, Brian Ubelaker, Brooke McDavid, Katerina (Katya) Wessels, Tom Kron, Nissa Pilcher, Robbin La Vine*, Kevin Foley*, Hannah Voorhees*, Scott Ayers*, Jason Roberts*
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS): Jared Long, Gerald Maschmann, Joanna Fox*; Fairbanks, Jeremy Havener; Galena, Aaron Moses, Boyd Blihovde*, Emmit Nicori*; Bethel, Holly Carrol, Jill Klein*; Anchorage, Frank Harris*; Kenai
- U.S. Forest Service (USFS): Greg Risdahl*; Juneau
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G): Lisa Stuby, Deena Jallen, Christy Gleason, Jesse Coleman*, Sam Decker*, Klaus Wuttig*, John Chythlook*; Fairbanks
- North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC): Diana Stram*
- Tanana Chiefs Conference Tribal Resource Stewardship Program; Nicole Farnham, Monica Gosslin; Fairbanks
- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association: Catherine Moncrieff*; Anchorage
- Public: Jim Simon, Mark Richards, Virgil Umphenour, Pollock (PJ) Simon Jr

* Denotes attended telephonically

Review and Adopt Agenda:

Motion by Member Honea, seconded by Member Vent, to adopt the agenda.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Review and Approve Previous Meeting Minutes:

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Vent, to approve the winter 2022 meeting minutes as presented.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Council Member and Chair Reports:

Pollock Simon Sr. of Allakaket reported that it is different now from when he was younger with no fish in the rivers, no moose, and no black bears. He continued to say that there was no salmon last year in the Yukon River, so Allakaket is relying heavily on sheefish and whitefish, and dog teams are being fed pike (Northern Pike), suckers (Longnose Suckers), and small whitefish. Member Simon noted that it was good to see everyone again after the last few years of teleconferences, which were difficult to sit through. Member Simon was told by his elders that in the 1940's there was a few lean years with no salmon, and he remembers being in Hughes in the 1950's where there were plenty of salmon, but people would still only take what they needed. Now there is no fish, and there are no fish camps, and the fish drying racks are falling over. King (Chinook) Salmon is the main food for the people up and down the river, and even when the fish are there, they aren't present in the numbers they used to be. He concluded by stating "The elders always said to take care of the fish and the animals and show them respect".

Jenny Pelkola of Galena reported that she is also glad to be meeting together again, but that since the last time there was an in-person meeting the Western Interior Region has been facing hardships with salmon numbers. Member Pelkola stated that Galena received salmon that was flown in from somewhere else, but it was a different kind of salmon with no oil, so she had to learn how to dry it, but she was thankful to receive it. Member Pelkola noted that moose season was successful for many, although her family was unable to get out due to Covid. She reported that the Loudon Village Council has a bounty on wolves that is helping the moose populations rebound, and there have been reports of many cows with calves within five miles of Galena.

Jack Reakoff of Wiseman reported that after the Winter 2022 meeting he assisted in drafting Wildlife Special Action Request WSA22-02 concerning sheep closures for Unit 24A and 26B, as well as shepherding it through the Federal process. Jack also participated in the Wood Bison Planning Team meeting conducted by ADF&G representing the Council the previous week. He observed that the Council needs a member from Grayling, Anvik, Shaguluk, Holy Cross (GASH) area to serve on this

Council and the Wood Bison Planning Team, but he will continue to participate until such a time as that occurs, as the wood bison project is very worthwhile for future generations of people in the GASH area. He conveyed that there was two inches of snow, but very few caribou currently in the Central Brooks Range and Upper Koyukuk Drainage, and that there are very few hares, moose numbers are low with plenty of bear predation; the only animal there seems to be an abundance of is spruce grouse. Member Reakoff concluded by saying it was also a bad blueberry year.

Kevin Whitworth of McGrath reported that the Kuskokwim River is still experiencing a multi-year, multi-species salmon collapse. Chinook Salmon crashed a decade ago, which prompted Federal management of the river, and the fishery has still not recovered. Chum Salmon crashed three years ago, and while that stock is slowly rebuilding, people are still not able to meet their subsistence needs with either stock, much less support traditional dog teams. Coho Salmon collapsed this year, leading to an even larger hardship and food security issue for the people of the Kuskokwim, which was exacerbated by ADF&G not having the flexibility to allow sufficient subsistence fishing opportunities on nonsalmon species. He noted that this summer was depressing with all the fishing restrictions and people unable to meet their subsistence needs, while also trying to conserve these three salmon populations for the future. Member Whitworth noted that the Council voted for him to attend the June 2022 NPFMC meeting but due to the timing of the NPFMC meeting he was unable to attend. However, he relayed that the NPFMC took no action to reduce the current Chinook Salmon cap or to establish a Chum Salmon cap. He also reminded the Council that he represents the Council on the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group.

Don Honea of Ruby reported that he didn't even put a subsistence net in the Yukon River this summer. He stated that the Council was talking about the effects of commercial ocean fishing on Yukon and Kuskokwim River subsistence fishermen for more than the last decade, and still last year those fisheries took a huge amount of Chum Salmon as bycatch. Member Honea recalled a Council meeting in Galena where there was discussion to have a moratorium on Chinook Salmon fishing partly because the people could always depend on the fall and summer Chum Salmon, but those runs have now crashed and still nothing is being done about the salmon numbers. Member Honea expressed concern that some areas of the Western Interior Region are not represented on the Council, such as the GASH area and a large portion of the Kuskokwim River. In order to fully understand this region and make informed choices, the Council needs to hear from all areas. Member Honea concluded by saying that while he had let his membership on the Council expire, but will be reapplying during the current application period, and will continue to ensure his local Fish and Game Advisory Committee is functioning.

Tim Gervais of Ruby reported that there were a lot of frustrated people on the Yukon with the fisheries closures on the Yukon. People had to utilize whatever canned or dried fish they had from prior years, and he had heard that Sockeye Salmon was shipped into the community. Member Gervais said this was met with mixed feelings as Sockeye Salmon is unknown in the Western Interior Region and people weren't familiar to its taste or how to prepare and store it, but everyone appreciated the effort. Member Gervais noted that there were only a few families in Ruby that put out whitefish nets, and while he was also selected by the Council to attend the NPFMC meeting in June, he was also unable to do so because the meeting is held at an inopportune time for subsistence and commercial fishermen to participate. Member

Gervais noted that the NPFMC did not act at their last meeting to assist in rebuilding the salmon stocks in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Drainages, but they should be. He said that people have been eating salmon on these rivers for the last 12,000 years and this historical use should take preference over any other kind of fishery. He concluded his report by stating that moose hunting around Ruby went well, which was needed with the salmon closures that were enacted this summer.

Darrell Vent of Huslia reported that the salmon shortage is affecting subsistence users, people are not able to go out to summer camps to utilize traditional ways of harvesting fish. Member Vent commented that he was raised in an Iditarod racing family, so he grew up being very busy during the summer putting up fish, but now those traditions aren't being passed down. Member Vent relayed that on top of subsistence salmon fishing being closed, it was a bad berry year, the water was high this fall, and it was difficult moose hunting. The brown bears, wolves and sport hunters are all competing for moose that subsistence users are more dependent on now as there is no salmon. He expressed great concern of what the people of the Yukon will have available to them in ten or twenty years since it is nearly impossible to live a subsistence lifestyle currently. He concluded by saying he remembers listening to his elders and now he is halfway there himself.

Tommy Kriska from Nulato reported that it is getting tougher to live a subsistence lifestyle anymore. Member Kriska also reported there was a lack of berries to pick, and little game to be found, bad weather during the fall hunt, no salmon to harvest, and fuel prices are just going up. He relayed that while many state residents live a partial subsistence lifestyle, the people that actually live in the village truly need access to subsistence foods. Member Kriska relayed that he and others in his community have been trapping wolves to help increase moose numbers, and that while the State and Federal government are not assisting, those entities get to make the regulations that allow non-local people into these areas to get the benefits of his trapping activity; he should have a seat at the table when decisions are made about moose hunting in his area. He stated that the State issues hunting permits near Nulato without the consent of Nulato or the Nulato Village Council. He concluded by noting that deference needs to be given to the potlatches as they are sacred, have been conducted for eons, and are an integral part of this region's traditions.

Service Award:

Mr. Tom Kron presented Chair Pelkola with a 15-year Length of Service Award.

Public Comments:

- Jim Simon gave comments about the ongoing subsistence salmon crisis in the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers. Mr. Simon stressed the importance of nonsalmon subsistence harvest, accurate accounting, and the overall lack of any management plans on these species.
- Virgil Umphenour, representing the Fairbanks Fish and Game Advisory Committee, gave comments in support of the Board of Fisheries (BOF) Proposal 140, which will be taken up at the February 2023 BOF meeting and concerns the Area M Commercial Fishery.

- Member Kriska, on behalf of the Nulato Tribal Council, requested the Council support their Resolution 2022-22, which is a request to the State of Alaska to create the Kaiyuh Controlled Use Area.

Motion by Member Simon, seconded by Member Gervais, to support Nulato's Tribal Council's Resolution 2022-22.

Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

- PJ Simon Jr. spoke in support of the Council's decision to submit Special Action Request WSA22-02, which the Board adopted and closed Federal public lands in Unit 24A and a portion of Unit 26B to sheep hunting by all users for the 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 wildlife regulatory years.

Old Business:

The Council received presentations on the following topics:

- 805(c) Report summary
- Board FY-2021 Annual Report Replies summary
- Special Actions update
- Wood Bison Restoration and Working Group Update

New Business:

Joint meeting: North American Caribou Workshop and Arctic Ungulate Conference in May 2023

Mr. Brian Ubelaker informed the Council about the Caribou and Ungulate Conference that will take place in May of 2023 in Anchorage. Council members provided input on topics for a symposium, including concern with current caribou and sheep management, hunting pressure and wanton waste, and the effects climate change is having on their populations.

Motion by Member Whitworth, seconded by Member Simon, to nominate Member Reakoff and Member Vent to attend the Conference to represent the Council.

Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Motion by Member Gervais, seconded by Member Vent, to nominate Chair Pelkola to be the alternate to attend the Conference to represent the Council if Member Reakoff or Vent are unable to attend.

Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Fisheries Management Reports:

Ms. Diana Stram presented the NPFMC Update.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Vent, to draft a letter to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Chair of the NPFMC requesting a current and full National Environmental Policy Act Review Process be conducted for the combined marine and freshwater ecosystem of the Kuskokwim and Yukon Drainages.

Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Ms. Holly Carroll presented the Yukon River salmon season summary with additional information provided by Ms. Deena Jallen and Ms. Christy Gleason.

Mr. Boyd Blihovde presented the Kuskokwim River season summary with additional information provided by Mr. Aaron Moses.

Mr. Frank Harris updated the Council on the Kuskokwim River Broad Whitefish subsistence harvest and spawning abundance project.

Fisheries Proposals and Closure Reviews:

Regional:

FP23-23-01: Rescind Jim River nonsalmon closure, institute Arctic Grayling harvest limit.

The Council considered OSM's analysis thorough and agreed freshwater stocks can support the proposed level of harvest.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Honea, to support fisheries proposal FP23-01.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

FCR23-02: Review closure to subsistence harvest of all fish in the Kanuti River.

The Council noted there was little concern for overharvest of nonsalmon fish given Arctic Grayling is the predominant species in the drainage and are targeted primarily with rod and reel. In addition, the system is distant from Wiseman and Coldfoot, which are the communities most likely to subsistence fish in the area.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Gervais, to support fisheries closure review FCR23-02 with the modification to rescind the closure to nonsalmon species only.

The motion as amended passed on a unanimous vote.

FCR23-03: Review closure to subsistence harvest of all fish in Bonanza Creek.

The Council noted there was little concern for overharvest of nonsalmon fish given that Arctic Grayling is the predominant species in the system and are harvested primarily by rod and reel. In addition, the

Council believes that Arctic Grayling will largely be harvested when engaging in other subsistence activities.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Whitworth, to support fisheries closure review FCR23-03 with the modification to rescind the closure to nonsalmon species only.

The motion as amended passed on a unanimous vote.

Crossover:

FP23-02: Revise customary and traditional use determination for Yukon River Salmon.

The Council agreed with OSM's analysis and noted that it would be natural for these coastal communities to harvest migrating salmon headed to the Yukon River. This is a fishery that has been occurring and the passage of this proposal would be recognizing that use.

Motion by Member Gervais, seconded by Member Simon, to support fisheries proposal FP23-02.

The Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

FCR23-05: Review closure to subsistence harvest of all fish in the Delta River.

The Council noted that the Eastern Interior Council is the home region and should make the decision.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Whitworth, to defer fisheries closure review FCR23-05 to the home region.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Statewide:

The Council did not take up any Statewide fisheries proposals.

2024 Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program:

Ms. Liz Williams and Mr. Corey Graham presented the Council with the Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program Priority Information Needs (PINs).

Motion by Member Whitworth, seconded by Member Gervais, to support the Kuskokwim Drainage PIN's as presented, and to support the Yukon Drainage PIN's with the modification to change item Q to include interception to the marine component.

The motion as amended passed on a unanimous vote.

Partners for Fisheries Monitoring Program

Ms. Williams informed the Council of an upcoming competitive funding opportunity through the Partners for Fisheries Monitoring Program.

Identify Issues for FY-2022 Annual Report:

The Council identified the following topics for inclusion into the FY-2022 Annual Report:

- To request the Federal Subsistence Board (Board) initiate a sheep management plan outlining a management strategy in place for the current Federally closed area in Units 24 and 26 before that area reopens to non-Federally qualified users.
- To express concern over the failing sheep population in Unit 19C, teamed with a lack of response from managers.
- To express concern over the continuing declining population of the Mulchatna Caribou Herd.
- To inform the Board that harvest of Yukon or Kuskokwim bound salmon in any marine commercial fishery should not be occurring when escapement goals and subsistence needs are not being met for the Yukon or Kuskokwim Rivers.
- To inform the Board that severe subsistence restrictions were placed on subsistence users on the Kuskokwim River during the fall state managed Coho Salmon subsistence season.
- To inform the Board that the continued co-management of fish on the Kuskokwim River between the USFWS and the Kuskokwim Intertribal Fish Commission is working, and that the current administrations executive order for co-management of natural resources should extend to the Department of Interior as well as the Department of Commerce, and that co-management should be occurring for species that are of conservation concern and those not of conservation concern but that are important for rural users.
- To inform the Board that the Council is concerned about what effects the increased reliance on nonsalmon species for subsistence needs in the Yukon and Kuskokwim Drainages will have on those populations.
- To encourage the Board to assist in every possible way to understand the driving forces behind the current multi-species and multi-drainage salmon crash, and to assist in trying to find a way forward to regain these runs.
- To express concern over Alaska Industrial Development Authority's continuing to push for development of the Ambler Road when development of this road would have substantial negative impacts on the Arctic ecosystem and to subsistence users.
- To express concern with the lack of representation of all areas of the Western Interior Region on the current Council makeup.

Motion made by Member Pollock, seconded by Member Honea, to approve the Annual Report with these topics.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Fall 2022 Council application/nomination open season:

Ms. Nissa Pilcher updated the Council on the current application and nomination open season for Council membership.

Council Member reimbursement for telephonic/internet expenses related to Council teleconference meetings

Ms. Pilcher informed the Council on how to get reimbursed for telephonic/internet expenses incurred during previous Council meetings held via teleconference. Council members discussed the difficulties of participating in a meeting via teleconference in rural Alaska.

Harvest of Wildlife for Sport Purposes in National Preserves

Mr. Peter Christian updated the Council on the intent of the NPS to enter regulations into the Federal Register on this subject, although this regulation had not hit the Federal Register at this time.

Motion made by Member Reakoff, seconded to Member Honea, to defer the issue to the Gates of the Arctic Subsistence Resource Commission.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

State of Alaska Board of Fisheries proposals:

Proposal: 140 Amend the South Unimak and Shumagin Islands June Salmon Management Plan to reduce commercial salmon fishing time.

The continued severe in-river subsistence restrictions and closures for multiple salmon species in both the Yukon and Kuskokwim River drainages, the failure of multiple salmon species to meet escapement goals in many tributaries in both drainages are of great concern. Genetics testing done on salmon caught in South Alaska Peninsula commercial salmon fishery demonstrate that a portion of the salmon harvested in this fishery are of Yukon or Kuskokwim origin. The State's constitution mandates sustained yield fishery management for all salmon stocks, with a statutory subsistence allocation priority over commercial harvest. Large by-catch of Chum Salmon in the mixed stock South Alaska Peninsula commercial needs to be addressed. The current management plan is not working to adequately protect future salmon runs in the suppressed drainages stocks of origin and should be changed to curtail the interception of Yukon and Kuskokwim bound salmon stocks.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Whitworth, to support Proposal 140.

The motion passed with 5 votes in favor with one member abstaining.

Proposal 91: Modify Kuskokwim Area lawful gear and gear specifications and operations to provide greater opportunity to harvest salmon other than king salmon during times of salmon conservation.

During the unprecedented collapse of the Coho Salmon run during the 2022 season, subsistence users on the Kuskokwim River were unable to fish with any gear type during a complete closure instituted by the

ADF&G. This closure was instituted after the salmon were already instream after the run strength was determined to be too weak for continued subsistence fishing opportunities. While this closure was to protect Coho Salmon, the lack of flexibility in current State regulations made it so that no gear types were allowed to target other healthy stocks of fish, leaving the entire river unable to subsistence fish for any species. Prior to the Coho Salmon collapse, severely depressed returns of Chinook and Chum salmon resulted in very limited subsistence opportunity. The inability for subsistence users to be able to deploy whitefish nets in the fall to supplement their diets with fresh fish or put up non-salmonid fish for the winter resulted in severe food insecurity for subsistence users. The Council fully supports giving ADF&G Kuskokwim River fisheries managers more options to allow selective harvest of other fish during times of any salmon species conservation.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Whitworth, to support Proposal 91.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Motion made by Member Whitworth, seconded by Member Honea, to transmit a letter of concern to ADF&G's Commissioner Vincent-Lang about the lack of subsistence opportunities during the fall 2022 subsistence season.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Proposal 79: Allow hook and line attached to a rod or pole when subsistence fishing upstream of the Nulato River mouth, to and including the Koyukuk River drainage up to the closed waters of the Koyukuk and the subsistence permit area.

The Council supports the ability of subsistence users to be able to harvest subsistence foods using readily available gear types.

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Gervais, to support Proposal 79.

The motion passed on a unanimous vote.

Agency Reports:

- Tanana Chiefs Conference Tribal Resource Stewardship Program Fisheries project update presented by Nicole Farnham
- Kuskokwim Inter-Tribal Fish Commission update presented by Member Whitworth
- Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association report presented by Catherine Moncrieff
- Koyukuk, Nowitna and Innoko National Wildlife Refuge update presented by Jeremy Havener, USFWS
- Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Update presented by Aaron Moses, USFWS
- Kanuti National Wildlife Refuge Update presented by Joanna Fox, USFWS

Motion made by Member Gervais, seconded by Member Reakoff, to transmit a letter of concern to the FWS Regional Director and the Alaska Chief of Refuges regarding the current plan to complex the Kanuti and Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge.

The Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

- Bureau of Land Management Agency Report presented by Bruce Seppi, BLM
- Bureau of Land Management, Central Yukon report presented by Erin Julianus and Geoff Beyersdorf, BLM

Motion by Member Reakoff, seconded by Member Gervais, to submit previous Council comments to BLM regarding the Ambler Road during the current BLM public comment open period.

Motion passed on a unanimous vote.

- Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve Update presented by Marcy Okada, Matt Cameron, and Will Deacy, NPS
- ADF&G Subsistence Division Update presented by Jesse Coleman, ADF&G
- Office of Subsistence Management Update presented by Tom Kron, OSM

Future Meeting Dates:

Winter meeting dates confirmed for April 4-5, 2023, in Aniak

Fall meeting dates selected are October 11-12, 2023, in Fairbanks

Nissa Bates Pilcher, DFO
Office of Subsistence Management

Jack Reakoff, Chair
Western Interior Subsistence Regional Advisory Council

These minutes will be formally considered by the Western Interior Subsistence Regional Advisory Council at its April 4-5, 2023 meeting in Aniak, and any corrections or notations will be incorporated in the minutes at that meeting.

For a more detailed report of this meeting, copies of the transcript and meeting handouts are available upon request. Call Nissa Bates Pilcher at 1-800-478-1456 or 907-455-1847, or by email at nissa_batespilcher@fws.gov.