



KUSKOKWIM RIVER

INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION

OUR RIVER, OUR PEOPLE, OUR FISH

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Report to the RAC | Winter Meeting 2023

March 2, 2023

The Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission (KRITFC) is a P.L. 93-638 contracted, 501(c)3 organization representing the 33 federally recognized Tribes of the Kuskokwim River watershed in fisheries management, research, and monitoring. KRITFC works to protect and sustain our Kuskokwim salmon fisheries and traditional ways of life using Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge and the best available Western science.

KRITFC would like to provide you with the following updates for you as we head into the 2023 salmon season.

KRITFC Leadership/Staffing Updates

We are holding our Annual Meeting and Elections of Executive Council members, Executive Officers, and In-Season Managers on April 5-6, 2023. This meeting is closed to the public and with Tribally appointed Commissioners invited only.

- *Our current Executive Council members are:* Betty Magnuson (Unit 1–McGrath), Jonathan Samuelson (Unit 1–Georgetown; Vice-Chair), Gerald Kameroff (Unit 3–Kalskag), Mike Williams Sr. (Unit 4–Akiak; Chair), Avery Hoffman (Unit 5–ONC/Bethel; Secretary), Ralph Nelson (Unit 6–Napakiak), and Adolph Lupie (Unit 7–Tuntutuliak).
- *Our current In-Season Managers are:* Betty Magnuson (Headwaters–McGrath), Megan Leary (Middle River–Napaimute), Mike Williams Sr. (Lower River–Akiak), Avery Hoffman (Lower River–ONC/Bethel), and Paul Cleveland (Tundra/Coast–Quinhagak).
- *Our current Elder Advisors are* Robert Lekander (ONC/Bethel) and James Nicori (Kwethluk).



Commissioners at our April 2022 Annual Meeting.

Our current full-time staff includes:

- Kevin Whitworth, Executive Director
- Nikki Pollock, Operations Manager – *joined our team in October 2022!*
- Justin Leon, Fisheries Biologist – *joined our team in February 2023!*
- Terese Schomogyi, Programs Manager
- Andrew Magel, Fisheries Technician/Jesuit Volunteer

TELIDA | NIKOLAI | TAKOTNA | MCGRATH | LIME VILLAGE | STONY RIVER | SLEETMUTE | RED DEVIL
GEORGETOWN | CROOKED CREEK | NAPAIMUTE | CHUATHBALUK | ANIAK | UPPER KALSKAG | LOWER KALSKAG | TULUKSAK
AKIAK | AKIACHAK | KWETHLUK | BETHEL | OSCARVILLE | NAPASKIAK | NAPAKIAK | KASIGLUK | ATMAUTLUAK
NUNAPITCHUK | TUNTUTULIAK | EEK | QUINHAGAK | KONGIGANAK | KWIGILLINGOK | KIPNUK | CHEFORNAK

2023 KRITFC-YDNWR Salmon Management

KRITFC looks forward to continuing our collaborative in-season management in 2023 with our partners at the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) at Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (YDNWR). This will be our 8th season of cooperative Tribal-Federal salmon management with YDNWR.

As part of our collaborative management, our 5 Tribal In-Season Managers, support staff, and YDNWR's fisheries management team plan to utilize our joint Salmon Management Strategy and Harvest Strategy to guide precautionary salmon management, grounded in Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge, local observations, and the best available Western science. Our team will be closely monitoring the Chinook, chum, and coho salmon runs with the ultimate goal of providing as many subsistence harvest opportunities as possible while conserving salmon populations for future generations.

Advocacy for Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) Salmon Conservation and Restoration

KRITFC is committed to stewarding our salmon using an ecosystem approach, from the gravel as smolt to the gravel as spawners. Beyond our in-river management, a significant piece of our stewardship involves advocacy at the federal and state levels.

For years, KRITFC has been urging the **North Pacific Fishery Management Council** (NPFMC; federal) to take action to eliminate Chinook and chum salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea-Aleutian Island pollock trawl fishery. Since the last Regional Advisory Council meeting:

- The Council appointed KRITFC Executive Director, Kevin Whitworth, and Chair, Mike Williams Sr. (on behalf of Akiak Native Community), to the **Salmon Bycatch Committee**, along with other Tribal leaders and industry representatives, to collaborate on ways to reduce salmon bycatch. The Committee met on November 28, 2022; January 25, 2023; and March 20–21, 2023, with the final meeting to workshop management actions for the NPFMC to take. *At the time of this writing, KRITFC does not have outcomes of the March 20–21 meeting to share.*
- In December 2022, the NPFMC voted unanimously to initiate action to modify chum salmon bycatch measures in the Bering Sea pollock fishery and tasked the Salmon Bycatch Committee with the first draft of these measures (see above).
- In January 2023, KRITFC, AVCP, and TCC hosted a **Tribal Consultation with NOAA Fisheries on the Bering Sea groundfish harvest specifications for 2023**, which increase the total allowable catch for commercial pollock operations and have significant impacts on salmon bycatch. We will continue to work and consult with NOAA Fisheries and other federal agencies on these issues.
- In February 2023, the NPFMC voted unanimously to initiate the process of creating a new **Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS)** – a document that guides all NPFMC groundfish fisheries management decisions, include bycatch management – that would better incorporate recent ecosystem/climate changes, management decisions, and Alaska Native knowledge. This is a momentous opportunity for Tribes to work with the NPFMC and NOAA Fisheries to make sure our voices are heard in their management frameworks. We hope to have more information on this soon.

This year, the **Alaska Board of Fisheries** (BOF; state) held its Alaskan Peninsula/Aleutian Islands/Chignik (Area M) Finfish meeting from February 20 through February 27, 2023. Many AYK

residents, including KRITFC staff and Commissioners, attended and testified in support of Proposal 140, which would reduce fishing time and area during June to mitigate the impacts of the June Area M commercial fishery on depleted chum salmon stocks returning to the AYK region.

However, the BOF ignored our urgency and voted Proposal 140 down, opting for minimal closures and unenforceable chum harvest caps that, even together, are insignificant to protect AYK chum salmon. KRITFC and Tribes across Western Alaska are incredibly disappointed with this outcome yet are continuing to push for ecosystem-wide conservation of our chum in other avenues.



2023 Salmon Research and Monitoring Projects

- The **Community Based Harvest Monitoring (CBHM) program** hires local Tribal citizens to collect post-harvest data from local subsistence fishermen, which is used by federal managers for their decision-making. KRITFC partners with lower river communities, Orutsarmiut Native Council (ONC), and YDNWR to create in-season indices of salmon run strength, run timing, and community harvest data. In 2023, we hope to expand the CBHM program by hiring more harvest monitors and by extending the survey season to monitor coho salmon run.. This project is funded by Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program (FRMP).
- The **Kwethluk River Freshwater Productivity (Screw Trap) Study** counts juvenile salmon smolt as they migrate out of the Kwethluk River and into the ocean, and compares these data to numbers of adult salmon returning to the Kwethluk to spawn. KRITFC is looking forward to partnering with USFWS and Organized Village of Kwethluk (OVK) to operate the screw trap from

spring through early summer this year. This project is funded by the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Sustainable Salmon Initiative (AYK-SSI).

- The **Kwethluk River weir** counts adult salmon migrating into the Kwethluk –the second most productive tributary in the Kuskokwim watershed – to spawn. This escapement data is critically important to understanding the impacts of marine commercial fishing intercept and bycatch on our salmon abundance. Since January 2023, USFWS and KRITFC have been in discussions with the OVK Council and community of Kwethluk to improve our weir operations this season and beyond. We look forward to operating the weir with our partners beginning in early summer and ending in September. This project is funded by the FRMP.
- The **Takotna River weir** is the only long-term headwaters stock assessment program, and its data is used to help calculate the annual Chinook salmon run reconstruction. KRITFC hires local residents to install and operate the weir, and we are looking forward to partnering with Takotna Tribal Council and ADF&G to operate the weir this summer. The 2023 season will be the seventh season KRITFC has funded and operated the weir. This project is funded by the FRMP.
- The **Environmental DNA (eDNA) project** filters water samples from tributaries to collect salmon DNA and estimate species abundance. This new, innovative technology was piloted at the Kwethluk River weir in 2022. KRITFC is looking forward to partnering with our weir crews and partners and University of Alaska-Fairbanks (UAF) to expand this program by collecting samples at both the Kwethluk and Takotna River weir sites, as well as analyzing the results from the 2022 Kwethluk River weir data. This project is funded by the AYK-SSI.



Installing the Takotna River weir.



eDNA sampling at the Kwethluk River weir.



2022 CBHM training with KRITFC and ONC teams.