

It's time to update Alaska's fish habitat permitting laws

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More than a century ago, chiefs from Alaska's Interior tribes came together in response to threats to our cultural values and ways of life. In 1962, Tanana Chiefs Conference was established by a group of energized Native leaders to protect the lands and waters that sustained hunting and fishing. By coming together in unity and advocating effectively about matters essential to our pasts and critical to our futures, we have been able to shape development across our landscapes while being proactive in protecting a way of life that many Alaskans enjoy today.

Access to sustainable healthy resources for our families and our people is critical to preserving our way of life and the way of life that all Alaskans hold dear. Salmon are a perpetual source of our well-being. For tribal people, salmon provide nutritious meals and form a cultural and spiritual tie that extends back to the beginning of time.

Multiple threats exist to critical salmon spawning and rearing grounds within Alaska. The Yukon River tribes are not the only ones concerned about Alaska wild salmon. King salmon populations have declined throughout Alaska, from the Unalakleet River in the Northwest to the Unuk in the Southeast and on to the Copper River in the Interior. This decline has impacted all Alaskans that depend on salmon for food or income. Whether it's climate change, bycatch, overfishing or development projects that bears the ultimate responsibility, the strain on the economy and health and prosperity of our river and coastal communities cannot be ignored.

Resource extraction and development form a critical component of Alaska's history and economy.

However, oil and gold will come and go. Sustainable fisheries are the true bedrock of our identity and lifestyle in Alaska. Whether large or small in scale, extractive industry must make sure that at the end of the day we protect healthy salmon populations for future generations. Without our wild salmon, our well-being, food sovereignty and economic security are threatened. This is the resource that has the ability to last forever if protected adequately today.

Alaska's fish habitat permitting law, Title 16, allows development proposals near salmon streams unless the proposals are "insufficient for the proper protection of fish and game." The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has no further guidance from the law on what constitutes proper protection of this valuable resource. Title 16 does not have strong, clear language designed to protect salmon spawning and rearing grounds from development, especially large-scale development.

This is why TCC is joining a large and growing number of Alaskans in publicly supporting the recommendations by the Alaska Board of Fisheries to the Legislature to update the law governing resource development around salmon streams. Alaskans deserve a transparent process that allows us to weigh in on how and when salmon habitat can be altered by development. Title 16 needs to be updated to create a fair and balanced public process.

These recommendations have a chance to transform into law, thanks to a new bill by Rep. Louise Stutes, R-Kodiak, introduced on March 27. House Bill 199 is a positive step forward in updating these critical laws.

In doing so, HB199 creates clear scientific standards through which proposals should be evaluated so that our agencies can make defensible decisions on permits and their impacts to wild salmon. HB199 also clarifies and ensures that Alaskans will have a voice on the select permitting decisions that could have significant impact on our wild

salmon populations. In creating clear mitigation guidelines, HB199 ensures that we won't simply trade one resource for another or allow a company to offset impacts through practices that don't help local communities impacted by those resource development projects.

Updating fish habitat permitting laws will provide certainty and long-term stability for all of us. Alaskans should not have to choose between protecting our way of life and growing the economy. If we're smart and foresighted, we can have both.

At the recent TCC annual convention, leaders from Interior tribes again came together to give voice to the issues and opportunities facing our communities and ways of life. Delegates from our 42 member communities voted unanimously in support of a resolution advocating for these changes to state law protecting salmon spawning and rearing grounds.

We now have the opportunity to strengthen Title 16 to ensure that large-scale development projects in Alaska do not compromise the sustainability and health of Alaska's wild salmon and the social, cultural, economic and spiritual well-being of the people that rely on them. By changing Title 16, we can proactively protect salmon habitat, preserve our cultures, and sustain our way of life.

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