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'Bleeding out': Cook Inlet setnetters feel pain of early closure as sockeye salmon continue pouring in

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Skiffs stand dry on the lawn on the Frostad-Hudkins' setnet site just north of Kenai on Aug. 3 in Kenai. Setnetters have been out of the water since July 20 when poor Kenai king salmon numbers triggered a full closure of the East Side sockeye fishery. (Photo by Elizabeth Earl for Alaska Journal of Commerce)

Editor's note: This story is the first of a three-part series about the Cook Inlet commercial fishery.

Every few seconds, a bright salmon throws itself out of the water on the beaches of Cook Inlet and splashes back. Normally, that would be a sight to celebrate for the hundreds of commercial fishing sites up and down the East Side of the Kenai Peninsula, but not this year.

"I can't even go to the bluff," said Ted Crookston, who setnets on the Salamatof beach just north of the mouth of the Kenai River.

Looking at the fish flopping in the water, unharvested, is too painful, he says. All the sockeye headed up the river past where setnets are usually harvesting them translates to thousands of dollars not going into a commercial fishery that has been bleeding out economically for more than a decade.

He says he's been fishing the beach for nearly six decades. This season is the earliest closure he remembers, with the last day of fishing on July 20. Since then, the East Side setnetters from Boulder Point north of Nikiski down to Ninilchik have been sitting on the beach, with many giving up and pulling their gear out for the season. The Salamatof fishermen say they had five openers in their whole season.

It all hinges on king salmon, which aren't coming back to the Kenai River in enough numbers. For the past three years, the late run of Kenai River king salmon has been too small to meet the lower end of its escapement goal, which means Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologists place restrictions on both the in-river sportfishery and the East Side setnets, also known as the ESSN, which operate close to shore.

This management structure is known as paired restrictions, which scale back setnetters' time and gear as the sportfishery's gear is restricted. The Board of Fisheries said the structure was justified because the setnet fishery harvests more kings than the drift fishery, tying it to the sportfishery if in-river fishermen are restricted.

The problem is that many setnetters say they have tools available to harvest sockeye without taking kings, and Fish and Game isn't using them.

The 600-foot fishery

On July 20, East Side setnetters fished their last day for the season, restricted to the 600-foot fishery from Boulder Point to Ninilchik. In the 12 hours that day, they harvested 36,668 sockeye and 72 kings. According to Fish and Game estimates, 11 of those kings were large late-run Kenai River kings.

Chris Every, a north K-Beach setnetter, said the fishermen in his area have been pushing for the 600-foot nets as a tool to allow the fishery to remain open when the king salmon run is low for years.

"We have data from the last four years with the 600-foot fishery," he said. "It's been fished between the rivers, and it continually shows the data that we're trying to prove."

He submitted a petition to the Board of Fisheries asking for Fish and Game to be allowed to reopen the setnetters to just the 600-foot fishery this summer, letting them continue to fish in a restricted manner while the in-river king salmon fishery is closed. The board rejected his petition 4-2, saying that the situation doesn't qualify as an unforeseen emergency.

Fish and Game Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang wrote in his finding that this year is not an emergency because it has happened before and the board specifically made the regulation that provided for it.

"Closure of the ESSN fishery has occurred in the past and is also not an unforeseen event," he wrote.

Several board members said they felt as though they hadn't fully understood the implications of the regulations they made nor had the data on the small king harvest from the 600-foot fishery. The board ultimately voted down Every's petition 4-2 and took no action on the other, a petition from the South K-Beach Independent Fishermen's association, an ad-hoc advocacy group.

Paul Shadura II, who submitted the petition on behalf of SOKI, said he felt slighted that that board didn't discuss the petition, which differed in specifics from Every's request. He said the group is interested in putting in an agenda change request, or ACR, this fall to the board related to this issue, but that doesn't help the situation with all those sockeye headed up the Kasilof River now, which the fishermen think will end up damaging the sustainability of the run long-term.

"(It's hard) to watch hundreds of thousands of potential dollars go into the system that do nothing for the future," he said. "The annihilation of the East Side setnet fishery takes out another component that's been here since at least the 1940s."

The data

Every contends that the commissioner's decision does not take the new data into account. Fish and Game opened the 600-foot fishery five times this season, though the four previous openings were in the Kasilof and North K-Beach areas. Each time, the harvest of large Kenai River late-run kings was less than 10 fish.

With that data in hand, the advocates argue, the tradeoff of kings for sockeye is a fair one. The other user groups are able to be in the water, while the setnetters lose all their opportunity.

"I never want to be sitting here when the dippers are dipping, the flossers are flossing, and the drifters are drifting," Every said. "We are a group of people that is being bankrupted."

Some of the setnetters also argue that the king goal is unreachably high. Andy Hall, a Kasilof-area setnetter and the president of the Kenai Peninsula Fishermen's Association, said watching the goal increase while watching the setnetters' fishing time be cut to achieve an escalating goal is frustrating.

"The paired restrictions are not equitable," he said. "The concept of managing a sockeye fishery based on its absurdly low exploitation rate on a struggling king stock that has had the highest escapement goal in 25 years placed upon it is profoundly flawed. The only comparable paired restriction would be if all (personal use) and sport fisheries on both the Kenai and Kasilof rivers were closed when a single targeted fishery was closed. I am not endorsing that by any means. It would be ridiculous, almost as ridiculous as the way the ESSN is managed."

During the Board of Fisheries meeting, Vincent-Lang said the data presented by the setnetters about the 600-foot fishery's impact might be one instance, but may not accurately capture the exploitation rate on kings if it were prosecuted for more days and when more kings were in the water.

During the meeting, no members of the Division of Commercial Fisheries were identified as being able to answer questions for board members; Forrest Bowers, assistant director of the division, said that was because he was traveling. Other staff were monitoring the meeting and able to answer questions, he said.

Ben Mohr, the executive director of the Kenai River Sportfishing Association, agreed; the setnets may have a lower catch rate on kings when there are fewer kings moving through the water, but it may go up when there are more kings moving through the area. While the 600-foot fishery may have merit and he said he understands the pain the setnetters are going through, the middle of the season may not be the best time to make decisions about management strategies.

"I think it's really important that all sectors come together to talk about what we can do to come up with more selective harvest techniques," he said. "I don't think in the middle of the season is the time to do that. I don't think in the middle of the season is the time to immediately call for experimentation."

The other side of the coin about the king goal is the coast-wide trend of king salmon declines. This year, several other large king salmon producing systems— the Yukon, the Nushagak, and the Copper rivers — all struggled to meet their king salmon escapements as well. Mohr noted that all three of those rivers have very little development along them, and they seem to be having the same trouble as the Kenai; that points to a problem in the kings' ocean life component.

Setting the king salmon goal higher can help provide differential levels of escapement in such a heavily used fishery, too, he said. If the goal is moved lower and lower, then the criticism might be that managers are just chasing a failing run down to make it look like they are meeting their goals.

The closure costs the in-river guides as well; while some can rebook trips, king fishing trips are the most lucrative. The guides, and many in-river anglers, have gone to catch-and-release all the time for kings as a personal move to conserve the fish, too.

"I don't think anybody would want to be accused of catching the last king," Mohr said.

The future

East Side setnetters, like most fishing user groups, aren't a monolith. They vary in opinion from district to district, and sometimes even site to site. The Salamatof fishermen's opinions about what should be done may come into conflict with the K-beach fishermen, and so on.

One thing they all seem to agree on, though, is that this can't go on without bleeding them dry. Crookston said the early closure has cost his site "hundreds of thousands of dollars."

"It is just horrible, what is going on," he said. "There is tens of millions of dollars being squandered. To have opened the fishery would have been nothing. Everybody would have plenty of fish... there is no downside, only upside, and (Doug Vincent-Lang's) true colors came out. We present you with a tool you say you want: harvest reds without harvesting kings."

Sarah Frostad-Hudkins' family has been fishing the Salamatof Beach since the 1920s, when her grandfather Ole Frostad arrived there. In the past, the fishing has stretched from late May into September, or as her husband Jason Hudkins said, "until the nets froze."

Over the years, the season has been trimmed back into about six weeks. This season, their crew pulled their nets and stored their skiffs on the hill above the site just as July faded into August, after five openers total.

"I feel like grieving is a good word (to describe the season)," she said. "We always grieve the end of the summer ... this one is just earlier."

The next part in this series will cover the economic aspects of the closure of the Kenai River king salmon sportfishery, the East Side setnet fishery and the proposed buyback program for permits in the east side setnet fishery.

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