

Months before season begins, state closes king salmon sport fishery and set-net fishery

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Parts of the Kenai River are still frozen over. But the Alaska Department of Fish and Game has already closed the early and late- king salmon runs to sport fishing — also shutting down the beleaguered Cook Inlet east side set-net fishery before fishermen can gear up.

“This is my 53rd year coming up as a set-netter and I have never experienced this,” said Ken Coleman, vice president of the Kenai Peninsula Fishermen's Association.

He said he’s never seen the fishery close,

completely, this early. Fish and Game does

A buoy at a set-net site in Ninilchik in June. *Sabine Poux / KDLL*

release a preseason forecast for the early king

salmon run every winter, to give guides and fishermen a sense of what to expect before the summer starts.

This year, the department projects just 2,900 kings in the early run and 13,630 in the late run — falling below the goal range set by the Board of Fish of 15,000-30,000 fish. In a [pair of emergency orders](#) released last night, the Department of Fish and Game said that meant it would close all sport fishing for king salmon in the river. [Another emergency order closes](#) Deep Creek and the Anchor River to sportfishing.

Changes have been hard on guides, who long relied on taking clients on [king salmon trips](#). As counts have continued to decline and closures have become more common, they’ve pivoted to fishing for sockeye, halibut and trout.

But for set-netters, whose fishery also closes when the king sport fishery does, there’s no plan B.

Coleman said his phone has been ringing all day, since the orders came out.

“They’ve been asking, is there any way to make a change? Is there anything mechanical that we can do, as set-netters, such as fishing less, or fishing shallower nets?” he said.

[Legal action](#) and [out-of-cycle proposals](#) to the Board of Fish both failed last year.

Coleman said the best they can hope for is that, in the middle of the summer, the department makes another assessment and gets to a point where it’s able to reconsider opening the fishery, at least partially. But he said that seems unlikely.