



Challenges to the Alaska Board of Fisheries – 2011 Upper Cook Inlet meeting

The salmon stocks of Upper Cook Inlet (UCI) support the largest public (non-commercial) fishery in the state whether measured by public participation, salmon harvested or economic value.

- UCI is unique among all of Alaska's maritime regions in its relative proportions of recreational and commercial fishing.
- Sport and personal use fishing is heavily concentrated in the region, and the recreational, social and economic values associated with these activities are substantial.
- By contrast, commercial fisheries in UCI yield a small fraction of the state's commercial harvest and the associated economic values are modest.
- With more than 80 percent of the allocation of salmon in UCI, commercial salmon fisheries generate less than 20 percent of the overall economic values, whereas with less than 20 percent of the allocation of salmon in UCI, sport and personal use salmon fisheries generate more than 80 percent of the overall economic values.

The economic values of sport and personal use salmon fisheries in UCI greatly surpass those of the commercial salmon fisheries by every available measure. Conservation and allocation of this valuable common property resource have been the dominate issues in the divisive debate over fisheries management in UCI.

While state fisheries management systems are designed primarily to accommodate commercial fisheries, the approach of incidental management to sport and personal use salmon fisheries in UCI does not work, is broken, and fails to optimize the significant recreational, social and economic values associated with salmon in UCI.

We have reviewed the background of fisheries management in UCI and have provided a set of solutions to fix chronic fisheries management issues at the upcoming Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) meeting for UCI in February, 2011.

Fisheries Management in UCI

The primary “money” fish for UCI commercial fisheries is sockeye salmon, which account for more than 90 percent of the economic value of commercial harvested salmon. The primary “money” fish for UCI sport and personal use fisheries are Chinook, coho and sockeye salmon. Each year, salmon returning to UCI include millions of sockeye, hundreds of thousands of coho, tens of thousands of Chinook, and highly variable numbers of chum and pink salmon.

Management of salmon fisheries in UCI are most easily understood if the season is stratified into early (May and June) and late (July through September).

As a remnant of a management plan adopted by the BOF in the late 1970’s the salmon moving through UCI prior to July 1 are allocated primarily to the public fisheries. These stocks include all early-run king salmon and the early-run sockeye salmon bound to the Russian River.

Numerous conservation and management concerns exist for early-run king salmon. KRSA has submitted proposals that address the management of the early-run on the Kenai River. KRSA is encouraging the Board to carefully balance the need for conservation with optimizing fishing opportunity that can be offered in a sustainable manner. Commercial fishery advocates are requesting a directed commercial fishery on early-run sockeye bound for the Russian River. Any commercial effort focused on early-run Russian River sockeye will also harvest early-run Kenai River king salmon. KRSA opposes any effort to direct a commercial fishery on early-run Russian River sockeye.

Although the salmon that return to UCI in May and June support important public fisheries, those fisheries are dwarfed by the public and commercial fisheries targeting salmon returning after July 1.

That same 1970’s management plan allocated the salmon returning after July 1 primarily to the commercial fisheries but with important caveats. Commercial fisheries were to be conducted in a manner that “minimizes” the commercial harvest of late-run Kenai River king salmon, early-run Kenai River coho salmon and Northern District coho salmon.

The only explicit allocation of salmon to the public fishery after July 1 is the 150,000 sockeye that are “built” into the in-river sonar goal for the Kenai River. Kenai and Kasilof sockeye dominate the public harvest during this time period, followed in number by coho bound back for a multitude of streams throughout UCI. Late-run Chinook also return after July 1. Late-run Kenai River king salmon are of particular importance

because of their uniquely large size and the world-famous nature of the sport fishery they support.

The commercial salmon fishery in UCI is managed to achieve an in-river goal in the Kenai River and an escapement goal in the Kasilof River. Commercial fisheries managers consider attainment of these two sockeye escapement goals to be their highest priority (Statewide on sockeye stocks with commercial harvest, commercial fisheries managers attain escapements within the escapement goals 40 percent of the time, go over the upper end 50 percent of the time, and fail to meet minimum escapements 10 percent of the time – Clark et al 2007).

Herein lays the primary problem with salmon management in UCI.

While prioritizing the realization of the sockeye escapement goals for the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers, managers also hope to achieve escapement goals for sockeye enumerated post-season in three locations within the Susitna/Yentna drainage, and at Crescent Lake, Packers Lake and Fish Creek.

Managers also hope, as a consequence of sockeye management, that the commercial harvest of late-run Kenai River king salmon will be “minimized” at least to the point that enough of these fish enter the Kenai River to achieve the minimum end of the escapement goal range. That escapement number also is determined by a sonar project of questionable accuracy. There is no allocation to the sport fishery.

Managers also hope, again as a consequence, to “minimize” the commercial harvest of coho and provide a harvestable surplus of this species to systems throughout UCI and to provide for escapement enumerated post-season in a few streams in the Knik Arm area.

That is an awful lot to hope for. Too much, in fact, when sustained yield and so much economic value rest on consistently positive outcomes.

No salmon are explicitly allocated to the personal use salmon fisheries on the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers and the sport fishery for sockeye salmon that occurs downstream of the sonar counter on the Kenai River. Yet, these fisheries are the next most likely to provide the public with opportunity to harvest fish. A regulatory framework of time, area and bag and possession limits govern these fisheries. Since the fish harvested are taken prior to being enumerated by the sonar counter that drives in-season management, these public opportunities will sustain harvest during all but the direst of years. The harvest opportunity drops precipitately when the commercial fishery is deployed day-in-day-out for days at a time.

All of the other public fisheries throughout UCI depend on what we consider “incidental escapement,” the amount of which is highly variable. As the number of sockeye bound back for Kenai and Kasilof increases so does the intensity of the commercial fishery. The relationship is clear: the more sockeye that return to the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers the less “incidental escapement” of everything else, everywhere. During years of high sockeye salmon abundance, the in-river returns of late-run king salmon and coho salmon are likely more dependent upon the level of commercial exploitation than on the size of the return of those species.

This unfortunate situation is only made worse by the rigidity of both the UCI fisheries management plans and the implementation of those plans by commercial fisheries managers when it comes to staying within the escapement ranges established for Kenai and Kasilof sockeye. All other stocks and species and all other fisheries pay a largely unknown price for keeping the Kenai and Kasilof Rivers within their respective sockeye escapement ranges.

BOF meeting for UCI in February, 2011

KRSA has submitted a suite of proposals that address the problems we have identified with the fisheries management of salmon in UCI. KRSA is convinced that the constitutional goal of “maximum benefit” accruing from these common property resources is not nearly achieved by the current fisheries management strategy and implementation. The set of solutions to fix these problems include:

Early season management:

- Maintain early season sport fishing priority for early-run Russian River sockeye and Kenai River king salmon – no directed commercial fishing on these stocks.
- Mandate that any “cost-recovery” efforts for sockeye target Kasilof sockeye, during established commercial fishing seasons, area and time.

Late season management:

- Recognize that prioritizing the attainment of escapement goals for Kenai and Kasilof sockeye at the expense of all other UCI salmon escapement goals is both a poor fisheries management practice and shortchanges sport and personal use management objectives.
 - o In 21.363 UCI Salmon Management Plan, remove section (e) in its entirety or at least remove “inriver goal” as one of the management objectives.

- o Keep the abundance tiers for Kenai River late-run sockeye – the tiers acknowledge recognition of the problem in UCI of complex, mixed stock salmon fisheries.
- Put more late-run Kenai River kings in the river by fishing the East Side Set Net (ESSN) different and / or fish less.
 - o Shallow up set net gear in ESSN from 45 to 29 meshes.
 - o Keep and expand “windows.”
 - o Fish the central district drift fleet independent of the ESSN in the corridor.
- Put more early-run Kenai River coho and Northern District sockeye and coho in the respective drainages.
 - o Establish an effective fish passage corridor for Northern District salmon stocks in 21.353 Central District Drift Gillnet Fishery Management Plan.
 - o End the UCI commercial season Aug. 5 to allow coho to enter UCI drainages.
 - o Don’t encourage expansion of the commercial fishery by targeting chum and pink salmon at the expense of coho.
 - o Return to the historical sport fish harvest opportunity of three fish per day throughout the season and throughout UCI.
- Leave the Personal Use fishery alone – it provides Alaskan residents with the best opportunity to harvest fish for their dinner table.

State fisheries management systems continue to grapple with the unique nature of the UCI sport, personal use and commercial salmon fisheries. KRSA’s proposals to the BOF for the UCI meeting in February, 2011 seek to abide by the mandate in the state constitution to conserve the state’s fisheries resource while optimizing the recreational, social and economic values associated with the use of these common property resources.