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House District 38
Kuskokwim & Johnson Rivers
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HB 332 – ALASKA CHINOOK SALMON RESEARCH AND RESTORATION ENDOWMENT FUND

SPONSOR STATEMENT FOR WORK DRAFT 1395/M

Akiachak

Akiak

Atmautluak

Bethel

Chefornak

Eek

Goodnews Bay

Kasigluk

Kipnuk

Kongiganak

Kwethluk

Kwigillingok

Lower Kalskag

Mekoryuk

Mertarvik

Napakiaik

Napaskiak

Newtok

Nightmute

Nunapitchuk

Oscarville

Platinum

Quinhagak

Toksook Bay

Tuluksak

Tununak

Tuntutuliak

Upper Kalskag

HB 332 creates an Alaska Chinook salmon research and restoration fund in the Dept. of Revenue. Grants from the fund would be issued to qualifying organizations. A 7-member board, including the Commissioner of Fish & Game and 6 public members from across the state, would administer the grants.

The state fish of Alaska, Chinook salmon, is an important staple food for Native villages of Alaska and is an economically important species for a number of commercial fisheries and a prized sport fishery resource. Nowhere else are Chinook salmon stocks more valued and essential to the basic way of life than in Alaska.

Chinook salmon populations in Alaska have undergone significant shifts in abundance during the past 40 years, yet little is known about the factors influencing these shifts. Eight of the 14 currently listed "stocks of concern" are Chinook salmon stocks, as defined by the Alaska Board of Fisheries in 5AAC 39.222.

Recent declines of salmon abundance have caused severe hardship in some areas and anxiety for the fishery-dependent communities of Alaska. Limited commercial fishing on Chinook salmon has occurred in recent years and earnings have deteriorated sharply. Poor Chinook salmon returns can exacerbate allocative tension and conflict between fishery user groups competing for a fully allocated fishery resource.

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been considerable variability in Yukon Chinook salmon population dynamics. Available harvest data show a thirty-six year period of sustained abundance early on, with significant declines during the past fifteen years.

To understand the trends and causes of variation in abundance of Chinook salmon, information concerning population biology, freshwater ecology, marine ecology, and population dynamics are needed. Knowledge gaps remain across the State of Alaska indicating that a multi-disciplinary research effort is needed to investigate the role of physical habitat, climate-induced environmental variability, and biological response in Chinook salmon populations if we are to meet the needs of Alaskans that depend upon this resource.

This legislation would create a stable, long-term source of funding to support high quality interdisciplinary research such as the recent work of the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Sustainable Salmon Initiative (AYK SSI). Research results and information from the AYK SSI is being utilized in a wide variety of ways to support sustainable salmon management. From escapement goal analyses to gaining an improved understanding of the dynamics of marine ecosystems, the AYK SSI is helping to provide fisheries managers with better forecasts and improved responses to changing environmental conditions.

The Alaska Chinook Salmon Research and Restoration Endowment Fund stakeholder board would, along with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, direct research monies to priority areas and topics based on an adopted Chinook Salmon Action Plan. These funds may also be used to leverage additional funding by providing necessary matching funds.

With this legislation, Alaska can increase its understanding of Chinook salmon and hopefully learn how to best target remediation efforts in order to begin restoring this vital resource.