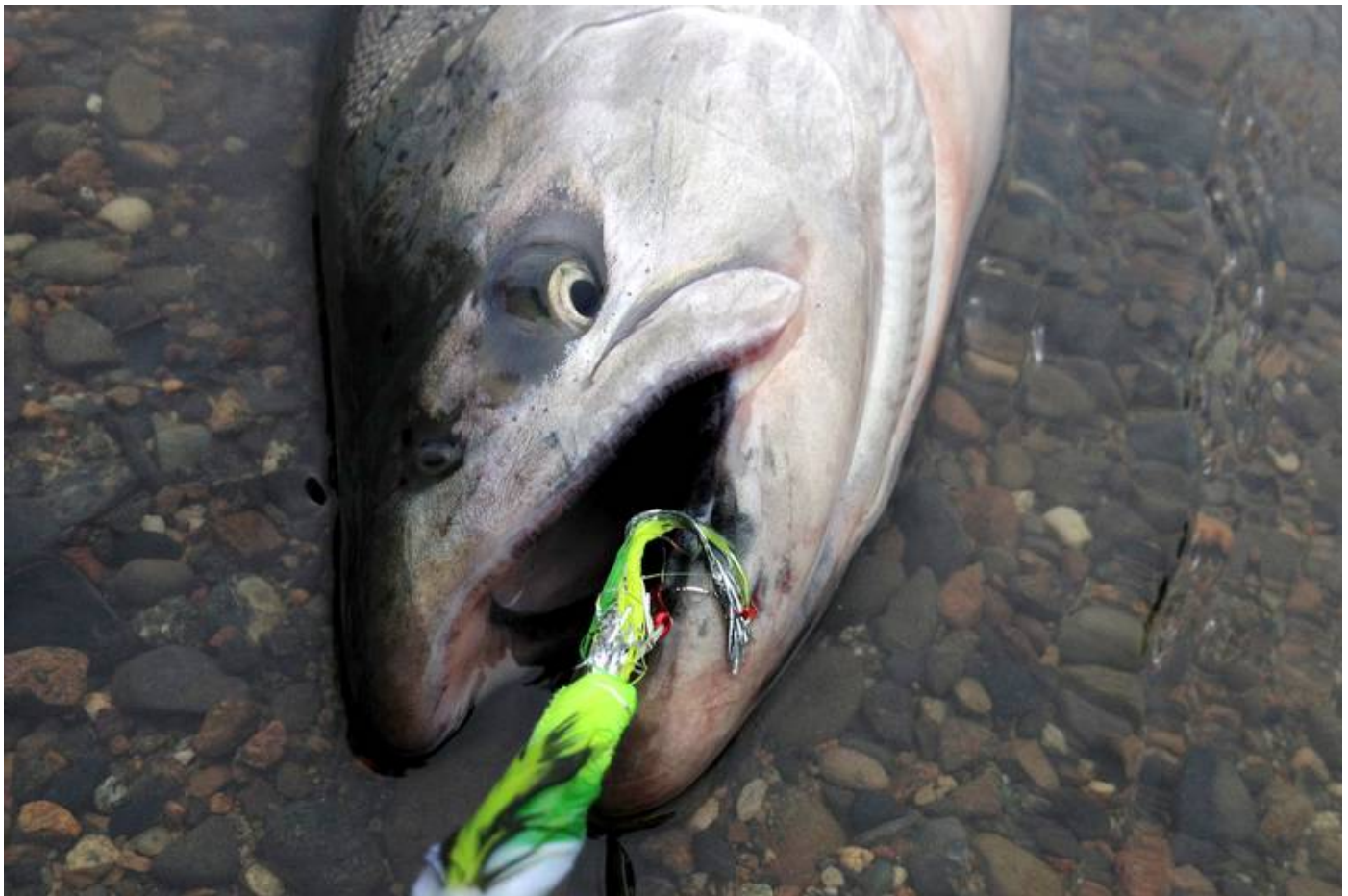


State shutter's most Cook Inlet king salmon fishing this summer in unprecedented array of emergency closures

By [Zaz Hollander](#) Updated: March 3, 2023 Published: March 3, 2023



King salmon caught with a fly and released in the Susitna River drainage on June 5, 2015. (Bill Roth / ADN)

The state is shutting down most summer king salmon sportfishing around Cook Inlet amid continued declines in the strong, hard-running fish that not that long ago filled freezers and fueled tourism in the state's most populated region.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game on Thursday announced an

unprecedented array of [restrictions and closures](#) on sport and personal-use fishing from the Kenai Peninsula to Mat-Su, a sweeping series of emergency regulations that illustrates the severity of king salmon population crashes and the broader salmon crisis playing out across the state.

The regulations mark the region's most restrictive preseason orders yet after 15 years of decreasing populations, according to Mike Booz, the state's Homer-based Cook Inlet sportfish area manager.

"These decisions aren't made lightly," Booz said Friday.

[\[Amid an unprecedented collapse in Alaska Yukon River salmon, no one can say for certain why there are so few fish\]](#)

The emergency regulations go into effect in May and extend through the end of July. The list of closures includes early and late king runs on the Kenai River as well as other areas, including Anchor River, Deep Creek and the Deshka and Susitna rivers.



A Kenai River king salmon caught and released. (Bill Roth / ADN archive)

One of the Kenai River closures triggers a shutdown of the [commercial setnet fleet](#) that targets sockeye salmon on the east side of the inlet, state biologists say. The order also closes a commercial drift gillnet fishery off the Kenai.

A handful of areas remain open to catch kings, including Anchorage's popular urban fishery at Ship Creek and the Eklutna Tailrace off the Old Glenn Highway in Mat-Su; troll fishing out of Homer, limited to one fish rather than two; and hatchery-raised kings in the Homer Fishing Hole and the Ninilchik and Kasilof rivers, though no wild kings can be kept. Catch-and-release fishing will be allowed on the Little Susitna River.

Guide Brian Ritchie said his Homer-based charter company was emailing clients with summer salmon or salmon-halibut trips to make it clear they'd be limited to one king instead of two.

“I don’t think people are going to change their bookings,” Ritchie said, adding he expected a little griping, as happens whenever a resource gets limited. “We’re not going to push back because we want to be conservative, but our clients definitely will.”



Anglers line the bank of Ship Creek, near downtown Anchorage, while fishing for king salmon during an incoming tide on June 12, 2022. Ship Creek will be one of a handful of Cook Inlet areas open to anglers the summer of 2023 following unprecedented pre-season emergency closures. (Bill Roth / ADN)

Kings, also called chinook salmon, are the largest Pacific salmon and spend one to five years in the ocean. They are Alaska’s state fish.

Cook Inlet kings are returning in lower numbers — and smaller — than before, an ongoing problem that state biologists largely attribute to ocean conditions, a broad category that can involve [climate change](#) leading to warmer water as well as salmon scooped up by trawl nets and competition with other fish including hatchery-raised ones.

[\[Alaska’s Bristol Bay sees record return of sockeye salmon. The warming climate may have helped.\]](#)

This week's emergency sport fishing regulations were based on predictions made in areas with the best available data, according to the order: the Deshka River in Mat-Su and the Anchor and Kenai rivers on the Kenai Peninsula. The predictions are based on "escapement" goals, or the number of returning fish that biologists estimate are needed to spawn and keep populations healthy.

"All of the forecasts are saying the runs are not going to be big enough to even make the escapement goals that we have," Booz said. "That means there's no room for sport fishing."

[\[The salmon mystery of Bristol Bay\]](#)

The emergency closures weren't exactly a shock, said veteran guide Andy Couch, who said he found few salmon of any kind in Mat-Su last season. Couch took out a few clients and then some friends on the Knik River near the Tailrace. All told, before the king season closed in mid-July, he saw two fish caught. One was a silver.

But this week's restrictions place a heavy burden on Cook Inlet's sport fishing industry, as well as some in the commercial fleet, when the problem extends far beyond the region, Couch said.

"I don't think we can expect a change and just keep doing the status quo," he said. "I think we need to say, 'Where could this problem have come from, and what are we gonna do about it? Are we gonna do anything to bring the state fish back?'"