

Importance of Alaska's Copper River Salmon and Public Comment

Opportunity By Andy Couch

During the first half of the summer of 2024 more Mat-Su Valley residents likely traveled North to the Copper River Basin to fish for salmon than to any other Alaska location. I make this statement, because all fishing for ocean-run king salmon was closed in Mat-Su waters (except for Eklutna Tailrace / Kink River and a small subsistence fish wheel fishery on the Upper Yentna River from May 1 through the normal season ending date on July 13. During a portion of that time both Copper River drainage sockeye and king salmon were available for harvest by subsistence dip net or fish wheel, by personal use dip net, and by sport fishing methods and means — before emergency inseason closures occurred in each of those fisheries. Upper Copper River sockeye and king salmon stocks are also considered by many Alaskans to be some of the most prized table quality salmon in the state. Early returning Upper Copper River salmon stocks are highly prized and valued by all user groups harvesting Copper River salmon.

Although the drive time to popular Copper River personal use and subsistence fishery opportunities near Chitina can be similar to driving time to the Kenai Peninsula, for Mat-Su residents in the Palmer / Wasilla core area, the harvest opportunity with either personal use or subsistence limits and dip nets or fish wheels as harvest tools can be significantly greater in the Copper River drainage during June through early July. Water conditions and the number of salmon migrating past can still influence harvest rates in the personal use, subsistence, and sport fisheries of the Copper River basin.

May 2024 Copper River Flats Commercial Harvests

With a better than average preseason sockeye salmon outlook and no salmon passage measured past the Miles Lake sonar site on the Copper River, the commercial fishery opened on Thursday May 16 (the earliest possible period for 2024) with **376 deliveries** harvesting **41,857 sockeye** salmon and **1,108 king** salmon compared to a projected harvest of 14,000 sockeye salmon for the 12-hour period.

With the sonar only operating along the north bank (because of icy conditions) and zero salmon counted past the sonar compared to the cumulative objective of 6,580 salmon through May 19, the commercial fishing period on May 20 was allowed. The reported 12-hour commercial harvests for May 20 were **399 deliveries** harvesting **1,284 king** salmon and **51,924 sockeye** salmon compared to a projected harvest of 51,000 sockeye.

With the sonar still operating only from the north bank, and a total of 356 salmon counted by sonar compared to the cumulative objective of 25,216 salmon through May 22 the next regular commercial period was allowed on Thursday May 23. Reported commercial harvests for May 23 was **422 deliveries** with **1,703 king** salmon and **73,896 sockeye** compared to a projected harvest of 66,100 sockeye.

May 26 was the final day in 2024 that the sonar operated only from the north bank, however with a season total of 6,503 salmon counted compared to a cumulative objective of 70,352 salmon, the **Monday May 26 commercial period was closed by emergency order.**

With sonar operating from both banks, zero daily count objectives attained in May, and a total of 22,558 salmon counted compared to the cumulative management objective of 114,538 fish through May 29, the commercial period on Thursday May 30 was allowed. Reported harvests for May 30 were **425 deliveries** with **1,958 king** salmon and **85,506 sockeye** salmon compared to a projected harvest of 91,100 sockeye for this period.

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Consequences of May 2024 Copper River Salmon Escapement Debt

* Instead of opening on June 7 as originally scheduled the personal use dip net fishery at Chitina was announced to remain closed through at least June 9 — because of an inadequate number of salmon counted passing the Miles Lake sonar site through May 26.

- The personal use dip netting opening at Chitina, for Alaska residents, was further delayed until June 13, based on late salmon counts past the Miles Lake sonar site.
- June 24 — the personal use king salmon harvest of 1 king salmon per household permit on a seasonal basis was closed —based on the lowest king salmon catch rates on record at the Village of Eyak research fish wheels.
- June 24 — Sport king salmon harvest closed for remainder of season and fishing with bait was prohibited in all Upper Copper River Basin flowing waters — based on low Eyak fish wheel catch rates and likelihood the king salmon escapement goal may not be met.

* June 29 All king salmon sport fishing (including catch and release) closed in the Upper Copper River drainage.

- June 29 - July 31 —**Harvest of king salmon closed in the Upper Copper River subsistence fishery** — along with a requirement that fish wheels must be closely attended to facilitate live release of king salmon.
- November 20 — ADF&G has still not demonstrated that even the lower end of the Copper River king (Chinook) salmon spawning escapement goal was attained during 2024.

Proposed Upper Copper River Salmon Management Changes

You can find most of the information concerning the upcoming Board of Fisheries (BOF) meeting in Cordova on the following web

page: <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=fisheriesboard.meetinginfo&date=12-10-2024&meeting=cordova#.fixed.,.12>,

Use this link to access meeting information for the Prince William Sound / Upper Copper River meeting in Cordova scheduled for Dec. 10 - Dec. 16, 2024. You can access all the Copper River proposals on this page --including proposals 51, 52, 53 which all open 5 AAC 24.360 Copper River District Salmon Management Plan. See also the ADF&G staff comments to proposals higher on the same page. The online portal for submitting comments is also on this page. Note comment deadline is 11:59 p.m. on November 26, 2024.

I support the concept of proposals 51, 52, and 53, however, I believe the sustainability of the king salmon resource and shared harvest opportunities for all user groups would be better served if: commercial fishery would only open after adequate salmon (and particularly king salmon) have passed upriver to better

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ensure that king salmon escapement goals should be met, and to also ensure that all upstream users should have a similarly early scheduled start to realistic harvest opportunity compared to the commercial harvest opportunity. ADF&G's cumulative management objective should likely be achieved before allowing each subsequent commercial opener in the Copper River Flats to better ensure adequate salmon spawning escapement levels for discrete salmon stocks throughout the run. See rationale below:

Copper River Management Concepts for Sustainable Maximum Shared Benefit

- Goal: Provide for spawning escapement needs and reasonable harvest opportunities for all user groups throughout a long season.
- Early returning Copper River salmon stocks provide necessary spawning escapements particularly for the Gulkana River and further upstream tributaries of the Copper River drainage.
- Early returning Copper River salmon stocks are highly valued by and may provide significant benefit for ALL user groups.
- The earlier in May and continuing through July that adequate (or greater) salmon counts occur past the Miles Lake Sonar (and later the Gulkana River counting tower) the higher likelihood all Upper Copper River salmon spawning escapements will be met or exceeded, and the greater likelihood all Copper River user groups will be provided reasonable shared salmon harvest opportunities throughout the season.

I encourage all Mat-Su anglers, and others who value wild Alaska king salmon, to consider and submit comments concerning how you would like to see Copper River salmon managed. Everyone paddles the canoe, but don't hesitate, because the comment deadline will be here soon (11:59 p.m. Nov. 26, 2024).

Fish On!

Andy Couch has harvested and dined on Upper Copper River salmon since the 1970s. Opinions expressed in this column are his own.