

March 12, 2025

Dear AC Chair and Members,

Thank you for taking the time to review Proposal 313. We apologize for not being able to attend the meeting in person tonight, but we did want to give you some information to consider when you discuss the proposal.

**Who are we?**

We are the proposers of Proposal 313, Brian and Lisa Gabriel and we live in Kenai. Lisa was born in Soldotna and is a lifelong Kenai Peninsula resident and Brian moved to Soldotna from Detroit MI at the age of 7. Brian commercial setnetted in Upper Cook Inlet while in high school and we bought our own setnet permits in 1987. Our family has worked on the beaches of Upper Cook Inlet harvesting sockeye for the past 38 years.

**Why did we apply for Commissioners Permit # UCI 2024-01?**

From 2018 to 2024 the Kenai River has suffered from low King Salmon returns and the eastside setnet fishery has experienced extreme restrictions. In 2024 the Kenai River King was declared a Stock of Concern. In 2023 and 2024 the Upper Cook Inlet Eastside setnets were closed pre-season and no set gillnets were fished. The Upper Cook Inlet Eastside setnet fishery has been declared an economic disaster for 5 of the past 6 Years and 2024 disaster declaration has been requested. At the Upper Cook Inlet Board of fisheries meeting in 2024, the board adopted commercial dipnets as alternative gear to replace set gillnets and adopted an extremely restrictive stock of concern plan, in which the Eastside Setnet fishery will likely have no chance of harvest opportunity with gillnets for the next 10 years. At that same meeting, the board encouraged setnetters to find alternative gear and methods to harvest sockeye and release kings alive. The need for some harvest method for eastside setnet fishery is why we are seeking your support for Proposal 313.

**Concept**

At the 2024 Upper Cook Inlet finfish meeting the Board of Fish encouraged the Eastside Setnet fishery to explore alternative fishing methods that could possibly harvest sockeye salmon while releasing king salmon alive. We conceived that we could utilize our existing running line system and instead of deploying a gillnet, we could set a seine net out and utilize the tide and current to billow the seine. After a short time, the seine would be retrieved by reversing the pull on the running line and bringing the outside of the seine back to shore. At this point we would continue to bring the seine to shore to the point where any king salmon would be identified and released alive. The remaining sockeye would be harvested.

**Where did we begin?**

In the Spring of 2024 Commissioner's Permit UCI 2024-01 was issued from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. At that time, we started outreach to the seine industry to help us determine the seine specifications needed for the set beach seine project. We cut a Prince William Sound seine to 600 ft, upgraded our running lines and stakes and built a custom trailer to manage the large seine on the beach and to transport the seine to other beaches for testing. We began outreach with testing families and coordinated with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) to carry out the requirements of the permit.

**Geared up to not fail.**

A huge part of our success this summer was combining resources with two other fishing families and surveying beaches for possible testing. We implemented a plan to prioritize king salmon identification in the set beach seine net and the safe release of all species if required. We considered safety measures for crew during deployment and retrieval of the set beach seine and continued outreach to our fellow fishermen to observe the set beach seine project to improve industry knowledge of the project.

**Stipulation of the Permit**

With the issuance of UCI Permit 2024-01, we were required to hire an observer. The observer qualifications included a bachelor's degree in biology or a minimum of two years field experience with Fish and Game. The role of the observer was to collect data regarding species catch, weather, tide, wind and fishing time and observe the test fishery as a whole. Testing dates were from June 20-August 31. Testing could occur every day as the weather permitted. On testing days all dead loss was to be processed and donated to charity at our expense. The live

release of all king salmon was required and a final report was to be produced for ADFG. Since there was no funding available from the State for the project, it was fully funded by us. The commissioner approved cost recovery on commercial dipnet opening days which allowed us to sell our fish to pay expenses and crew shares on those days only. Communication with the department before and after each opening as well as access to the fishing site were a stipulation of the permit. A second permit, UCI Permit 2024-03 was issued to Gary Hollier this season in late July. The report provided to the department is attached and contains the full data observed from each permit. The report is, **Experimental Set Beach Seine Fishery Report, A Summary for Permits UCI-2024-01 and UCI-2024-03** prepared by observer, retired ADFG biologist, Robert Begich.

### **Challenges encountered**

We identified many challenges with the project, including seine net management, tidal influences, high surf, weather, beach dynamics, obstructions on the beach, boulders, trap piles, coal, debris in the water and snags.

### **Proof of Concept**

We determined six questions that needed to be answered if this project were to be utilized across our fishery. The answered questions are as follows:

1. Could existing infrastructure hold a 600 ft set beach seine without breaking or damaging the existing infrastructure and equipment? Yes
2. Could existing infrastructure, gear and equipment be utilized easily and affordably in the transition from set gillnets to set beach seine nets? Yes
3. Could enough sockeye salmon be harvested for set beach seines to be an economically viable fishing method? Yes
4. Could set beach seines be adapted to different beaches tested throughout Upper Subdistrict statistical areas? Yes
5. Could set beach seines be utilized within existing leased or traditionally fished locations? Yes
6. Could a set beach seine successfully harvest sockeye and release king salmon that are in viable condition? Yes

### **Where do we go from here?**

We are continuing our industry outreach and collaboration with stakeholders. We are continuing to determine the estimated industry participation and determine the sockeye harvest potential. We are continuing collaboration with State and Local agencies in preparation for the Alaska Board of Fisheries meeting in March.

### **Overview of Proposal 313**

The key elements of Proposal 313 are as follows:

- Allow use of Set Beach Seines as Alternative Gear only in the Stock of Concern Plan
- Allow One Beach Seine Per Permit
- Season June 20 through August 15
- Openings Three Days Per Week
- Additional Openings on Abundance
- Set Beach Seines from Shore
- Fish on Shore Fisheries Leases or Historical Locations
- Set Beach Seine Maximum Dimensions Defined
- Release All King Salmon

### **Wrap Up**

The Eastside setnet fishery has continued to fall into complete closures and disaster declarations. With the use of set beach seines, we found that we could once again become a viable fishery that could be prosecuted using the existing infrastructure and gear at minimal cost to the fishermen. Of the 17 days our permit fished this past summer, the project caught 15,513 sockeyes and caught and successfully released 13 kings. One king was a large king

measuring greater than 34" at approximately 36" in length, three were greater than 20 inches and less than 34 inches and six were greater than 16 inches and less than 20 inches and three measured under 16 inches. Of the kings that were captured and released from the set beach seine, none were bleeding or injured and all were released in excellent condition. Testing for permit 2024-01 occurred at two locations of North Kalifornsky Beach and one location on Salamatof beach. Testing for permit 2024-03 occurred on North Kalifornsky Beach.

Many people have expressed concerns about training for fishermen before they start the season with a set beach seine. We have proposed an educational test fishery prior to the season for set beach seiners to come and view and receive hands on participation prior to the beginning of the season. Fishermen would be able to participate in the deployment and retrieval of the set beach seine and be able to see the infrastructure we used this past season. We would demonstrate the safe removal and release of fish and the proper handling and release of king salmon from the seine and all fish would be released on testing days.

We have heard that the fishery should require monitors. With the fishery being conducted on public beaches, we feel that there could be a creel type program to gather data if needed and that reporting requirements currently in effect for reporting all fish caught on a fish ticket should be followed and enforced by the Alaska State Troopers or the Fish and Wildlife Troopers.

We feel that fishing from June 20 through August 15, on three set days per week to harvest sockeye is necessary because the harvest potential for targeted sockeye will be nowhere near the historic harvest capability of a full set gillnet fishery. We estimate 45 to 50 seines would participate in the fishery based on past buoy sticker purchases, shore fisheries leases, family groups and surveying fishermen. The set beach seine is a tended gear that requires full participation by fishermen during the entire opening so we are not anticipating multiple seines per fishing family. The net is an active net as long as the conditions to fish are there. If the water is too low or too high, the set beach seine will not fish. They are fully dependent on adequate water and current to billow the net and it does not actually catch fish without them. The quality of the fish is premium with no net marks or scale loss due to the slow retrieval of the seine where fish swim to the beach because they are not gilled. Set beach seines will be used only in the stock of concern plan, The harvest of set beach seines are not a replacement for gillnets. When king salmon stocks recover and the king salmon are delisted as a stock of concern, the plan and set beach seines go away.

The set beach seines provide opportunities for families who have leased or staked beach locations. We understand that this is not a solution for every eastside setnet permit holder but know that approximately 80 percent of the beach locations are connected to outside net locations and permits. A very large portion of the fishery is represented. The question of fairness has been raised for the outside net owners. At this time, the use of commercial dipnets is allowed to upper cook inlet setnet permit holders to provide opportunity while in the stock of concern plan and we encourage outside net owners to seek commissioners permits to test ways to utilize their outside locations while releasing kings alive. Since we did not test the set beach seines on outside net locations, we do not have data to report. There was a permit, UCI 2024-02 that was issued for testing offshore nets this past season, but the permit holder did not operate and therefore no data was collected.

Again, we are asking for your support for Proposal 313. We feel that we have found the most responsible and feasible solution to get the eastside setnet fishery back in the water again to harvest the plentiful sockeye salmon returning to Upper Cook Inlet. Set beach seining on our existing infrastructure, using the lead lines and cork lines that we already have in our totes, replacing the gillnet web with seine web, and using our existing equipment is a reasonable solution while king salmon stocks are in recovery. The survival of this 140-year-old fishery is important to the economy of the Kenai Peninsula, the State of Alaska and the setnet families that have been trying to stay afloat for the past 7 years of extreme King salmon restrictions.

Thank you for your consideration of Proposal 313. If you have questions, please feel free to email or call us.

Thank you,

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