



## YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

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### **Greetings from the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association!**

Here is a summary of the #12 2024 Yukon River Salmon In-Season Management Teleconference held Tuesday, August 20, 2024. Call lasted 64 minutes. 52 callers participated.

**Background:** Yukon River salmon management teleconferences are held annually every Tuesday in June, July, and August for managers and fishers throughout the Yukon River drainage to discuss fishing conditions and management strategies in real time as the salmon run is occurring. Funded by a grant from the US Fish and Wildlife.

**Communities participating:** 17

### **Management Reports:**

#### **Alaska Department of Fish and Game**

##### **Bonnie Borba, Fall Season Research Biologist, Fairbanks, Alaska**

I will provide the Fall Season assessment to date. Based on the in-season assessment that Fall Chum salmon run size is projected to be below the drainage wide escapement goal range of 300 to 600,000 Fall Chum salmon. The average Fall Chum salmon run size is over 900,000 fish. The smaller than anticipated run size is supported by in season assessment of the age 4 Fall Chum salmon return has been weak. As of August 19, the cumulative CPUEs for both Lower Yukon Test Fish and Mountain Village are below historical medians for Fall Chum salmon. The three-quarter point of the Fall Chum salmon passage usually occurs between August 18th at these projects, which has just passed. Coho salmon are tracking late and weak at these projects as well, with the first quarter points typically occurring around August 16. The Mainstem Yukon River Sonar project operated near Pilot Station transitioned to Fall Season counts on July 19. As of August 19, the cumulative passage is at 156,000 Chum salmon. This is well below the median cumulative passage of 489,000 Chum salmon for the state. The three-quarter point for this project usually occurs on August 19 for Chum salmon. The Chum salmon run is passing its third group of fish that came in on the recent storm. Genetic mixed stock analysis on the Chum salmon that passed the Mainstem sonar from July 18th through August 6th indicated approximately 43% were Summer Chum salmon and 57% were Fall Chum salmon. The Fall Chum salmon stocks consisted of 28% border US, which is the Teedriinjik, Sheenjek and Draanjik rivers and 12% Canadian and 17% Tanana Falls. For Fall chum salmon, this represents 79% US origin and 21% Canadian stocks. The next portion of the run typically contains more than 90% Fall Chum salmon stocks. The samples are just getting shipped in through yesterday. They're on their way to Saint Mary's right now, so hopefully we'll get some more information by next week. Assessment based on the historical genetic proportions for this time of year suggests there are 109,000 Fall Chum salmon in the Yukon River. As we approach the three-quarter point of the run. The median passage for this date is 507,000 Fall Chum salmon, and the current projections of the end of the season total run size are 150 to 200,000 Fall Chum. The preliminary age composition of 367 Chum salmon sampled from the drift gillnet fishery Lower Yukon Test Fish project through August 17th consisted of 52% age 4 and 47% age 5 fish, which compares to the 2021 to 2023 historical averages of 67% age 4 and 31% age 5. The percentage of female Chum salmon was 47%, which is below the historical average of 56%. The average length of 572 millimeters is well below the historical average of 584mm through August 16th. Monitoring of the escapement in the Upper Yukon portion of the drainage at the Teedriinjik and Sheenjek sonars both began on August 5th. As of August 19, the Teedriinjik sonar operated by US Fish and Wildlife Service has a cumulative passage of 2,800 Fall

Chum salmon, which is below the median of 900,000 fish. The Teedriinjik has an escapement goal range, which is 85,000 to 234,000 Fall Chum salmon. The Sheenjek sonar project is operated by ADF&G and as of August 19 as the cumulative passage of 601 Fall Chum salmon which is below the median of 1,900 fish for this date. Eagle sonar will transition from Chinook to Fall Chum salmon in the coming weeks. To date, they have not captured any Fall Chum salmon in the aforementioned net. Last year, the transition occurred on August 23rd. Coho salmon typically entered the Yukon River in mid-August, with the bulk of the run between August 16th and the 27th at the Mainstem sonar. As of August 19, the cumulative passage is 11,000 Coho salmon at the Mainstem sonar. This compares to the median cumulative patches passage of 48,000 Coho salmon by the state. The Coho salmon run size projection based on late run timing is 44,000 fish. Where the average is 222,000 fish. A few straggling pink salmon have been passing the Mainstem sonar and the run is usually 99% complete by this date. The average of non-salmon species has been estimated since June 5th and it's past their three-quarter point of their historical run timing and they're tracking near average in abundance.

**Christy Gleason, Yukon Area Fall Season Manager, Fairbanks, Alaska**

I'll provide a management update. Currently, the Yukon River Fall Chum and Coho salmon runs are projected to be one of the lowest on record, as Bonnie mentioned. The Fall Chum salmon run is unlikely to meet any of our escapement goals, which is why salmon fishing is closed for Chum salmon. With the bad news of the Coho run now, you know they're coming in late and they're coming in a weak and a lot lower than we expected. Since we're seeing a run that's bad for both species, we'll be announcing a closure for Coho salmon later this week. We'll also be announcing a change in the gillnet for 4-inch or smaller mesh. We're going to have to put those nets on a reduced time. The reason is, we have poor Fall Chum runs and poor Coho salmon runs. We took this same management action in 2021 when we saw the lowest runs on record for both species. Unfortunately, that's where we are again this year. It's really important to let those migrating salmon go by and we really want fishermen to be able to go after whitefish. Though in the fall, we know that that's a good time of year to go get whitefish in late September and October. So please try to set your 4-inch skill net in a place where you're going to catch whitefish. Please try and go after them with hook and line. I'll give you my phone number if you want to talk more. I'm here in the Fairbanks office. My phone number is (907) 459-7240. I'm happy to take any questions and explain more. If you want to hear what the current fishing schedule is in the year for your area. You can call the hotline number at 1-866-479-7387.

**Fred West, Summer Season Research Biologist, Bethel, AK**

I think Bonnie covered the transition date between Summer Season to Fall Season up at Eagle. We're currently, as of yesterday the 19th, the passage percentage for Chinook salmon was 22,470,  $\pm$  just under 300 fish. So that's coming in close to what we forecast preseason, which is good news, but it's well below average of the normal average of 49,000. We're below what a good run size would be, but it's better than it has been the last couple of years. I don't really have anything else to report. The tagging project is still tracking fish as they're moving upriver. Most of the fish have passed through Alaska and now in Canada. There are a few fish that are still kind of moving their way out, but most of them should be out of Alaska now and into Canada, we're still tracking some.

**Deena Jallen, Summer Season Fishery Manager, Fairbanks, AK**

Summer Season Management has pretty much wrapped up. Thanks to Bonnie, Christy and Fred for all the updates. Just heading into the Fall, we'll be looking towards the Postseason Subsistent Salmon Harvest Surveys. We'll be working on getting the season summaries out and preparing for all of the Fall and Winter meetings that will be coming up on through the winter. There are also like Fred mentioned, the tagging research, that projects ongoing. There's also projects that are ongoing out in the Bering Sea as well. I'll be out of the office most of September on doing the Southern Bering trial survey, helping out on that vessel. So it'd be really great to see the fish when they're out in the Bering Sea, before they come back. To help learn more about that really important part of their life cycle.

## **Andrew Padilla – Research Biologist, Fairbanks, Alaska**

My name is Andy Padilla, I'm a research biologist at Fish and Game in Fairbanks. I'm the project lead for the subsistence harvest survey that we do annually. We've been doing the survey annually, more or less in the exact same way since the late 80s and prior to that, before statehood. We will be coming to communities this year. Starting the first week of September, we'll start in the Lower River and work our way Upriver as the days progress. We are really hoping that folks will provide us with harvest information. I know that there was not that opportunity particularly with salmon, but that survey is not solely focused on salmon. It's also focused on other species as well as providing comments that we provide directly to the managers after we receive them. That includes whether you want to be contacted or questions answered directly from managers. We do pass those on immediately to managers, which is a way for you to communicate with how you felt, the season went or questions about management and any other related topic. We will be sending out flyers to communities as we get closer and post messages on Facebook announcing when we'll be in your community. We'll be starting in Emmonak the first week of September.

## **Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada**

### **Adam O'Dell, Fishery Biologist**

Stock Assessment at our Porcupine River camp, near the community of Old Crow, an estimated 523 Chinook salmon have passed, compared to 512 on this date last year and the average of 3,071. This is the last day we will be reporting on Chinook at the Porcupine sonar. And we've had a total of 378 chum salmon pass the sonar, compared to a to-date average of 537. Our DFO technicians are on site at the Eagle Sonar camp and supporting this program, along with ADF&G, through the season. The Eagle sonar is located about 29 km downstream from Alaska's border with Canada; it is a collaboratively delivered project with ADF&G. In support of the 2024 Chinook Radio Telemetry program, DFO crews have installed 12 towers throughout the Yukon. These towers aren't equipped with satellite uplinks, so we won't be able to review data until receivers are pulled post-season, however we have completed one aerial survey, with others following shortly. The Klondike River Sonar, operated by Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation is also operational and the most recent estimate is 179 Chinook as of August 2. This compared to 209 on this date last year and the average of just over 1,151. Sonars on the Pelly River, operated by Selkirk First Nation have been operational since July 4, and as of August 19 there has been an estimated cumulative passage of 3,229 Chinook salmon, compared to 1,785 on this date last year and the average of about 5,428. The video weir on Tatchun Creek which is run by Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation is now operational, and a total of six Chinook have been observed as of this past weekend. The Big Salmon Sonar is operational with an estimated 1,681 Chinook as of August 17, compared to 1,645 on this date last year and the average of 4,552. The Takhini River sonar, run by Kwanlin Dün First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council and Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, has been operational since early August. As of August 12, there has been an estimated cumulative passage of 172 Chinook salmon, compared to 59 on this date last year and the average of 238. The Nisutlin River sonar, located in the Teslin River watershed and managed by Teslin Tlingit Council, is now operational and reporting daily passage of Chinook salmon. As of August 6, there has been an estimated cumulative passage of 226 Chinook. Last year on this date, the cumulative passage was 427. The Whitehorse Rapids Fishway, run by Yukon Energy, observed the fish passing Chinook on August 5, and the total to date is 101, compared to 49 on this date last year and an average of 506. Environmental Conditions, Air temperatures across much of the territory were mild for much of the past week, with rain and cooler temperatures spreading across the territory today. As such, water temperatures, which were already average to below average, will continue to be within thermal ranges of migrating salmon.

### **Jaelyn Kendall, Fishery Manager**

Canadian Management, there will be no changes to Canadian management to report for Chinook Salmon. In line with the newly signed 7-year agreement and the preliminary low Canadian origin Chinook salmon outlook for 2024, DFO has closed the recreational fishery for 2024 and will continue to close through 2030, and the current long-term closures in both the commercial and domestic (non-indigenous food fishery) fisheries will be extended through 2030. For Canadian origin chum salmon for 2024, with the low outlooks

for the Yukon River and Fishing Branch River not anticipated to meet spawning objectives in Canada the public angling fishery has been closed for 2024 and the commercial and domestic fishery long term closures will continue.

## **Organizational Reports:**

### **Special Reports:**

#### **Boyd Blihovde, US Fish and Wildlife, Senior Advisor for Conservation, Anchorage, Alaska**

I'm here to give a little summary and update on Gravel to Gravel. Many of you maybe have not ever heard of a Keystone Initiative or Gravel to Gravel. I'd like to start by explaining what it is first. Keystone initiatives were developed by the Department of Interior in 2022. The US Fish and Wildlife Service and the BLM, Bureau of Land Management, co-proposed the Gravel to Gravel initiative as 1 of the 9 Keystone Initiatives, there's 9 total. Gravel to Gravel being one and it's the only Keystone initiative in Alaska. It goes from Alaska, Kuskokwim, Yukon Norton Sound Region from Western Alaska, all the way into Canada. For those folks from Canada, we're not attempting to take over or make a land grab or anything. The purpose of extending that boundary into Canada is because the fish don't know those international boundaries. Our intent is to partner with First Nations, Canada Government and partners in Canada, as well as in the United States in Alaska to conserve and restore headwaters streams and all streams that salmon depend on. I would like to just go into how we got started. We really were formed because of all of the input and concern that we heard from tribes across Alaska. In 2022 especially, it reached sort of a boiling point here in Alaska, Western Alaska and on the Kuskokwim and Yukon specifically when it comes to salmon populations and the drop in numbers, especially for subsistence users across the state. The Department of Interior agencies and Department of Commerce, with NOAA heard loud and clear that this was a major concern. You all specifically requested that you wanted the agency to focus on salmon conservation from a Gravel to Gravel perspective, meaning the whole life cycle of the fish, not just what's happening on spawning grounds but also to include what's going on in the Bering Sea and an Area M. These places that we've all heard about in the media and across different outlets. So that's why Gravel to Gravel has the name that it does and why it was initiated in late 2022. Then in 2023, we received funds for Phase 1 and 2, as we're calling it for Gravel to Gravel for those projects to begin. In 2023, we started with projects that included things like restoration of mined lands for the BLM especially, but also Fish and Wildlife service. Working on projects from Fairbanks all the way to the coast, trying to do whatever we could to restore headwater streams, especially in places that have been impacted by mines. Then Phase 3 funding just came out in late 2023 and early 2024. We just started receiving the funds for those projects as well and they also include projects like tribal capacity building, working directly with the tribes to try to enhance their capability to assess, manage, regulate and to restore salmon populations themselves. I think we've all heard many times that not just tribes, but other partners as well don't have enough capacity to do much of this work themselves. That's what some other projects went to in Gravel to Gravel. It's a total of about 40 projects that have been funded to date and roughly \$36 million in bipartisan infrastructure law funding. There's also some funds, especially going to the Bureau of Land Management on the U.S. side from the Inflation Reduction Act or IRA. There's funding from multiple pots, but most of the funding the Gravel to Gravel has come from the bipartisan infrastructure law to date. To give you a little bit more background, you might be wondering. What is the overall purpose of Gravel to Gravel? What's our goals? What's our mission? I just would like to share with you. There's 3 primary goals for Gravel to Gravel and just paraphrasing here is one. Is to restore salmon tributaries in the Arctic, Yukon and Kuskokwim Region. Arctic is really viewed as the Norton Sound Region, not the whole Arctic. Secondly, it's to restore and promote resilient ecosystems in the face of climate change, that also includes food security concerns and that's where salmon comes in again. Lastly, it's to promote co-stewardship in the Norton Sound Yukon and Kusko Regions by working directly with tribes. We're really trying to center everything we do with the tribes. To promote leadership from the tribal entities that are in Alaska and Canada and work through a co-stewardship framework in everything that we do in Gravel to Gravel. So those are the three big goals that tie in very consistently with the overall Keystone Initiative goals that the Department of Interior has established. That's where we are to date and as I mentioned, we have 40 projects that have been funded so far. 10 projects have been funded through the Fish and Wildlife

Service. Our largest project to date is a \$5 million project that is the capacity building for tribes. That's what we're calling grants to tribes. That essentially split as evenly as we could \$5 million between the Kusko, Yukon and the Norton Sound Regions. It's 1.6 million that went to each of those sub regions and that funding just recently went out to help build capacity. To support the tribes in doing much of the assessment and restoration work themselves. That's where we are currently and moving forward, I'd like to share what's next and on the horizon for Gravel to Gravel. Phase 4 in the bipartisan infrastructure law funding is set to come out to all the different Keystone Initiatives. The Gravel to Gravel Initiative is hopeful that we'll get up to \$4.3 million in possible funding from the bipartisan infrastructure law. That money is primarily designated to go to tribes, our intent will be to start initiating that process as early as November 2024. Just a few months away, we can't promise that we're going to get all of that funding yet. That determination will happen at the Department of Interior within the US government here shortly. We will know hopefully by November whether we get the full \$4.3 million. Once we do find that out and we receive the funds, both the BLM and the Fish and Wildlife Service are going to be administering different parts of those funds. We expect to advertise at least a portion of that funding to be competitive amongst partners, tribes and tribal representative groups through the Region of Gravel to Gravel. So that's good news, I think moving forward. One other update is that we just recently announced inviting 110 of the tribes. That's basically all tribes and tribe representative groups that are in Alaska at least, and we haven't reached out to Canadian tribes yet or First Nations. At least in Alaska, we recently sent out invitations. Inviting all of the tribes to the MOU efforts. It's a Memorandum of Understanding that we're planning to sign. We hope that will be signed in October when we have an in person meeting on October 10th and 11th in Anchorage. That invitation to that meeting will come out and it's going to be open to everyone that's a partner in Gravel to Gravel. One thing that we hope to do is to have project updates, restoration projects, assessment projects, research that's going on in Gravel to Gravel, including obviously on the Yukon. We hope to have a whole day of essentially like a symposium to share information between agencies, tribes and NGO's that are doing work throughout the Region because one thing we've heard about from our partners is that oftentimes the communication isn't as good as it should be. Many folks don't understand what's happening and who's doing what in their region, or even on their tribal lands. That's one of the important parts of that in person meeting on October 10th and 11<sup>th</sup>. The other part, we hope to have a signing ceremony for the MOU. We really are just in the infancy stage of Gravel to Gravel. We've just started to build the relationships to get everyone to the table who needs to be there, who are either working on salmon restoration projects or they may be a leader in the climate change efforts throughout the Region. Working on permafrost melt research, other aspects of climate change impacts that affects Gravel to Gravel as well. We want to have folks there at the table to share, and it's all about communication at this point and trying to build those relationships. But as we move forward, we definitely hope that we can have more impacts on the conservation of salmon, including as I mentioned earlier, what's going on in the Bering Sea. NOAA has been invited to the table and we're still working on getting the right people to attend meetings and be a part of the solution. We all know that the life cycle of salmon doesn't start at the West Coast of Alaska, it extends into the ocean and that part of their life cycle. That's what gravel the gravel is all about.

## **Community level reports:**

### **CANADA**

#### **Whitehorse:**

**Dennis Zimmerman** - Quick update here in Whitehorse, the weather has changed drastically. We had three hot days and four hot days actually and now it's raining and lots of precipitation. So that's about my update.

#### **Dawson:**

**Sabastian Brown** – I'm listening and I don't have any particular update.

## ALASKA

### Nenana:

**Victor Lord** – Longtime no talk. Glad to be online here and I just listened to the gravel the gravel. Glad to hear the Bering Sea is included. There's a few things that we have been studying out there for a while and also good to hear all our salmon spawning grounds are included. Thank you for that report.

### Y5abc&d

#### Eagle:

**Andy Bassich** - Quick update here. The river level is extremely low, it's been low all summer. We have water levels right now more like mid-September. I don't know if there's much fishing activity going on in the Eagle area. I've been running a 3 1/2 inch mesh net off back sloughs for most of the summer trying to get non-salmon. I have noticed an uptick in Pike coming through the area. Some of them are quite large actually, as large as Chum salmon and Jack Chinook salmon. So that's kind of interesting. Most of them are carrying eggs, so they must be on a spawning run somewhere farther upriver. That's about all I have for the activity in this area. I do have a couple of questions that maybe could be answered at some point in time during this call. The first is, if there's any update on the cyanide spill from the Eagle mine up in Canada? I haven't heard anything recently about that, it'd be interesting to hear if there's any new news on that. Secondly, it'd be nice to get a report on the progress of Fall Chum. There's nothing at Eagle, but it would be nice to know approximately where they are if there's any being caught in the Rampart Region. I'm not sure if they're getting the ichthyophonous study done now or not, but I know they were running the wheel there. That would be good to track in future teleconferences. Where the fish are at when you were there? Then if there's any information on Chinook salmon still migrating up the Yukon. I'm assuming there's probably some with the late migration, there's probably still some Chinook salmon in the river going past Eagle. Maybe there's any report on test net catches at Eagle sonar, that would be good. Then finally appreciate having Boyd on board today, it was a really good summary, really look forward to working with the Gravel to Gravel into the future. Just a reminder that and I know you stated it, Boyd, but most of these fish, the majority of their life is spent out in the marine environment. So that's going to be a huge part of the solution in Gravel to Gravel moving forward. The thing that concerns me the most is the shrinking size of all salmon species. Fall Chum, Chinook, Sockeye, Coho, they all seem to be getting smaller. There are some serious concerns there, as that affects productivity.

**Sabastian Brown, Dawson** - I suppose the biggest news is that the company responsible for this spill has gone, what they call in Canada into receivership. It's basically a form of bankruptcy and the board of the company has dissolved. The CEO has left and the Yukon Government has taken over control of the site and is now responsible for trying to clean up the spill, as well as trying to review, government thinks that it might be able to sell this mess, but realistically it needs to start thinking about finding closure and cleaning it up. That's basically where we're at right now.

**Andy Bassich** - So in receivership, if the mine goes belly up, that means the Yukon Government and the federal government, Canada is responsible for all the cost of cleanup?

**Sabastian Brown** - Yes, Andy, that means that the company has gone belly up. It no longer exists and the Yukon government is now fully responsible for all of the clean up. The federal government, although it indirectly subsidizes this work, doesn't play a significant role in in the actual cost of the remediation. The Yukon and Canada made a deal a few years ago that in return for a large chunk of the certain pie. Yukon would now be responsible for these kinds of incidents. The Yukon Government is responsible for the clean-up. It's been estimated that it will take at least \$100 million to get the cyanide out of the ground.

**Andy Bassich** - Yeah, I guess that's a big concern for me. I've seen this happen in other places around the world. It seems to be a model for these large mining companies that, when they get into trouble like this, they just go out of business and that there's basically no repercussions to the mining. I think that's something that Canadian Government needs to work on because it's not only in Canada that some of these mining

companies are having this impact. It's also other nations where there are mining activities that are taking place. Just to comment, but kind of disturbing to hear that. Thank you, Sebastian for that update.

**Deena Jallen, ADF&G, Fall Season Manager**

The final days of counts at Pilot Station for Kings were on the 22nd of July and the 25th of July and they estimated like 73 and 76 on those days. Based on travel time, fish from those last couple of days of passage should be getting up to Eagle maybe in another day or two, I guess, whether or not they've speed up or not. The very last King should be traveling through District 5 and heading towards the border right about now.

**Fred West, ADF&G, Summer Season Research Biologist**

The last Chinook caught at Eagle Sonar was on the 18th, they didn't catch anything yesterday. There's very few Chinook left, but there might be a handful passing through and that's what our tagging data was showing that there still might be very few Chinook passing. I think it's pretty much over for Chinook anyway.

**Deena Jallen, ADF&G, Fall Season Manager**

For Fall Chum salmon, those first groups we had. The peaks of them that were like August 2nd and August 7<sup>th</sup>, we had two little bumps downriver. They're not expected up to Eagle until September 7th and September 12. We still got a little bit of time and they should be catching some shortly. The bulk of the fish, the beginning fish will be there any day, but that first piece, whatever ones would have Canadian stocks and there will be the first week of September.

**Tanana:**

**Stan Zuray** (At the Rapids) - There's virtually no fish and there's hardly anybody in the Rapids. There are few people back and forth closing up camps. Last time we fished, there was no sign of any kind of, it was just before the closure, and there was some Chum being caught. They were all pretty watermarked and white flesh. One net caught enough fish for two families for dog food, and then pulled the net. So there's hardly been any fishing either.

**District Y2:**

**St. Mary's:**

**Matty Beans** - Doing your water temp down here. We've got about 48° water temp. We got really extremely high water because it's been raining a lot the last couple of weeks. No more beaches, the Andreafski is bank to bank high water. A lot of bears up there in Andreafski. Look like they're eating Humpies. On the Yukon there, the water came up quite a bit. But close by, I never seen nobody fishing. I don't know what's going on out there. I never hear no updates on the test fisheries. Lately it's been rough weather, but finally sunshine yesterday.

**Open Discussion / Questions:**

*Call ended 2:04 PM*