



YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

721 Depot Dr Suite 14, Anchorage, AK 99501 ♦ Tel: 907-272-3141 Fax: 907-272-3142 ♦ Toll-Free 877-999-8566
www.yukonsalmon.org ♦ serena@yukonsalmon.org

The Role of the Alaska Board of Fisheries: Sustainability or Politics?

The recent decision by the Alaska Attorney General's office to overturn several Area M management proposals raises serious concerns about the State's commitment to sustainable fisheries management. The proposals were specifically designed to reduce fishing time and area in order to improve the passage of Chinook and chum salmon destined for Western Alaska river systems. These are not healthy, surplus stocks. They are populations experiencing years of decline, resulting in severe restrictions and, in many cases, complete closures of subsistence, sport, and commercial fisheries throughout Western Alaska.

For the communities depending on these fish for food security, cultural continuity, and economic well-being, the decision represents far more than a procedural setback. It sends a troubling message that conservation measures aimed at rebuilding depleted salmon populations can be discarded even when the biological concerns that prompted them remain unresolved.

The State has justified overturning the proposals based on alleged ethics violations involving Board of Fisheries members. However, if ethics concerns were the sole reason for invalidating these actions, an important question remains: What becomes of the conservation objectives that those proposals were intended to address? The challenges facing Chinook and chum salmon did not disappear when the board actions were overturned.

At its core, this decision appears to prioritize maintaining the status quo in interception fisheries over taking precautionary steps to protect vulnerable salmon stocks. The result is that the burden of conservation continues to fall disproportionately on Western Alaska communities, many of which have endured years of fishing restrictions while watching opportunities for meaningful management action repeatedly delayed or dismissed.

The Alaska Board of Fisheries was established to manage fisheries resources for the benefit of all Alaskans and to ensure the long-term sustainability of those resources. Sustainability is not achieved by maximizing harvest opportunities in the short term; it is achieved by making difficult decisions when conservation concerns warrant action. When proposals specifically intended to improve the passage of struggling Chinook and chum salmon are overturned without addressing the underlying biological concerns, it raises legitimate questions about whether the State is fulfilling its responsibility as a steward of Alaska's fisheries resources.

The long-term health of Alaska's salmon runs depends on management decisions that place conservation first, particularly when stocks are in decline. If the State is unwilling to uphold measures designed to improve salmon escapement and rebuild struggling populations, then it risks undermining not only public confidence in the management process, but also the future sustainability of the very resources it is charged with protecting.

The key word is *sustainable*.

Too often, discussions surrounding fisheries management become centered on economics alone. Commercial fishing provides jobs and economic benefits, and those contributions are important. Increasingly, the monetary value of a resource seems to outweigh the long-term sustainability of the resource itself. This is where management decisions become unbalanced.

The Board of Fisheries has two foundational policies that should guide every decision it makes: the Sustainable Salmon Fisheries Policy and Alaska's Subsistence Priority. These are not optional considerations. They are the framework for responsible fisheries management.

Before any decision is made, the board should ask:

- Does this action help prevent overfishing?
- Does it contribute to the long-term sustainability of the stock?
- Does it minimize adverse impacts on habitat?
- Does it provide a reasonable opportunity for subsistence uses?
- Does it share the burden of conservation among all user groups in close proportion to their impact on the stock of concern?

These questions are particularly important when dealing with Chinook and chum salmon bound for Western Alaska. Many of these stocks remain at historically low levels, and rural communities have endured years of fishing restrictions, food insecurity, and cultural loss. Subsistence users have repeatedly borne the greatest conservation burden while watching other fisheries continue to operate.

Conservation should not be a burden carried by one user group alone. The Sustainable Salmon Fisheries Policy specifically calls for conservation measures to be shared proportionally among users when stocks are in trouble. If one group consistently shoulders the sacrifices while others are largely insulated from restrictions, the system is failing the very principles it was designed to uphold.

The debate over Area M is not an allocation dispute. It is a test of Alaska's commitment to sustainable fisheries management. For years, Western Alaska salmon stocks have experienced severe declines, forcing unprecedented restrictions and hardships on communities that depend on these fish. When conservation measures intended to improve salmon passage are overturned, it raises legitimate concerns about whether sustainability remains the primary driver of management decisions. The question facing Alaska is whether the long-term health of salmon populations will remain the priority, or whether short-term political and economic pressures will continue to outweigh conservation needs.

Alaskans deserve a state government that upholds its own constitutional mandate for sustained yield, follows its established conservation policies, and takes meaningful action when salmon stocks are at risk. The responsibility for rebuilding depleted salmon populations should not fall disproportionately on any single group or region, but should be shared through management decisions that prioritize the long-term health of the resource above political and economic pressures. The future of Western Alaska salmon—and the communities that depend on them—depends on it.

Serena Alstrom
Executive Director