

Public Comment to NPFMC
October 6, 2021

Waqaa, Council Members, thank you for taking my testimony today. My name is Serena Fitka, Executive Director for the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association better known as YRDFA. YRDFA is an association of subsistence and commercial fishermen from the 42 rural communities along the Yukon River and their tributaries. I am from the Yukon River. I grew up in St. Mary's and I teach my 3 kids the importance of fishing. For the first time in history we were not able to harvest salmon. We were not able to throw our nets in the river. We were not able to share our first catch of salmon with our elders. We were not able to teach our children how to traditionally cut and smoke our salmon. You ask why should this be of your concern? I should not have to explain the basic fish lifecycle to this Council as many of you have many years of western schooling on fisheries. Yes, the salmon does spend a majority of their lives in the ocean and yes it is your concern. We are not here to push our issues onto you, we are here to ask for your help. This is the issue of all fishermen; in-river and in the ocean. How many more years will it take for you, the Council, to realize we are all connected. Our ecosystem is in a fragile state and the oceans you fish in should be your utmost priority.

I was fortunate enough to travel to several Yukon River communities this summer. I traveled by boat from St. Mary's to Pilot Station and Marshall in mid-June and during my boat ride I saw 1 boat and no set-nets. I went with a skiff from St. Mary's to Emmonak on June 30th, which is at the mouth of the Yukon River. During my ride downriver, I saw 3 boats and 2 4" mesh set nets. Close to 200 miles from the mouth to Marshall a total of 4 boats and 2 set nets. The river was deserted. In mid-July I traveled to Manley Hot Springs on the Tanana River, in Alaska's Interior Region and again the river was deserted. In August I traveled to Ruby to attend their community's culture camp. They had no fish to cut. All these communities I travelled to had one thing in common. No fish. But it is more than no fish. Families were not working together to fish, children were not learning the many responsibilities that come with harvesting fish, taking care of the net, the boat, the preparation and processing of the fish and tending to the smokehouse. This is our livelihood. Our fishing traditions are fading. Is this the beginning of an end to the Yukon River salmon? Home to one of the longest wild salmon migrations in the world.

The 42 communities on the Yukon River have been sacrificing their fish harvest in hopes to replenish their salmon stocks. There are many factors to why our salmon are not returning to which we can do nothing about; however, bycatch is something we can control. We are in crisis mode and this is not an unreasonable request to ask for zero bycatch. Given the state of our salmon runs, zero is the only reasonable number. The Council cannot ignore what is happening to other river systems. The repercussions of the Council actions on Bycatch are felt throughout the North Pacific by the failing eco-system we are experiencing. We must remove ourselves from the management silos that were created; thinking one has nothing to do with the other, and come to understand that the difficult decisions must be made in order to sustain this valuable resource; our salmon.

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to provide this testimony and for your time. Quyanaknek.

TIME: 5:07