

Yukon Fisheries News

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

SPRING 2020

When the going gets tough, the tough go fishing...

BY HOLLY CARROLL, ADF&G SUMMER SEASON YUKON AREA MANAGER

It's been a challenging and scary time for all of us, and not knowing what is coming next makes things much harder. We've been working diligently at ADF&G to make sure we have effective, sustainable plans in place for fishing this summer. With travel and shipping disrupted, Subsistence-caught food is going to be more important than ever, and we have an essential service to provide- in the form of fisheries management. As most of you know, fishery assessment projects are integral to understanding salmon run strength and timing. Data collected at these projects gives management flexibility to allow more fishing when runs are abundant, or to restrict fishing if necessary in order to conserve weak runs. **The 2020 outlook for Chinook salmon is a run size similar to last year.** Under normal assessment circumstances,

you could expect a fishing schedule that might feel similar to last year. However, many of our projects require us to travel to remote communities, so we have to create logistical plans that would eliminate the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to keep local people and our crews safe. It may be that some projects cannot be carried out safely or effectively, even with the best planning in place. These are the details we are figuring out now. Communities are taking their own important steps to keep residents safe, and we are working closely with them to make sure any contingency plans for operating a project are acceptable to Tribal and city governments. At this time, we don't yet know which projects will operate this season and how it will affect our ability to manage. Rest assured, a detailed management strategy will be sent to Yukon

households and shared on social media. Managers will then have an opportunity to discuss the summer season schedule with fishermen on the YRDFA preseason meeting teleconference on May 12, at 1:00.

It's important for fishermen to continue to be conservative with their harvest of Chinook, and focus more efforts on harvesting abundant chum, coho and other non-salmon fish to provide enough food for their families if necessary. We honor and acknowledge that Chinook are culturally important and traditional practices are not easy to change. But Yukon fishermen have proven time and again how creative and adaptive they are at using other species of fish the river continues to provide us. The use of 6 inch or smaller mesh gillnets may increase harvests

HOW DO I BECOME A YRDFA MEMBER?

- Call 1-877-999-8566 Ext. 5
- Go to yukonsalmon.org
- Go to YRDFA's Facebook Page
- Fill out & mail in the form on page 11.



Protecting and promoting all healthy wild fisheries and cultures along the Yukon River drainage.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Yukon River In-Season Salmon Teleconferences will begin on **MAY 19, 2020!**

Your voice is needed to participate in your fishery. Managers and other fishermen need you! You may need other fishermen and their observations in their part of the river.

All Yukon River fishermen and those interested in Yukon River fishing are invited to call in to the Yukon River In-Season Salmon Teleconference on Tuesdays at 1pm in May, June, July, and August. These calls are an opportunity to:

- Share what you are seeing in your part of the river.
- Hear what is happening in other parts of the river.
- Hear what the managers have learned from the monitoring projects.
- Hear what the managers have planned for upcoming management actions.
- Ask managers questions directly.

**Call 1-800-315-6338,
code 98566# (YUKON)**



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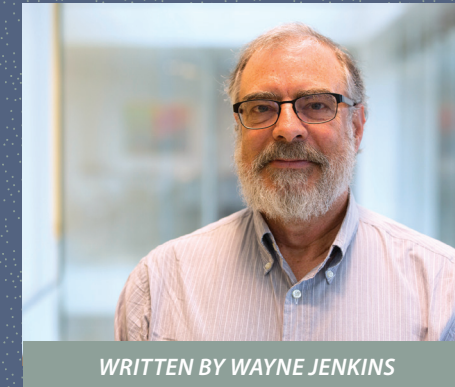
Message from the Director

Perhaps you have heard, YRDFA has a new Director! Serena Fitka from Saint Mary's is completing our transition work together and taking the reins of leadership. The timing could be easier I suppose. Serena was hired just a few weeks before the Coronavirus erupted, changing all of our lives in ways we could never have understood previously. Despite all that's happening, YRDFA is moving forward and we welcome Serena, as we plan and adjust to new realities. Serena looks forward to building strong relationships with Yukon River fishers, fishery managers and the many communities and other stakeholders involved.

Working in separate offices is normal for YRDFA staff as we have been a "virtual office" for several years but cancelling all of our Spring meetings has really made things interesting and challenging. Here's a short list of meetings that were planned for April and were **cancelled, rescheduled,** or moved to **teleconference** for Coronavirus safety concerns:

1. Yukon River Panel meeting
2. YRDFA 30th Annual Directors meeting
3. YRDFA In Season Salmon Survey training & workshop
4. Regional Planning Team for the Comprehensive Salmon Plan
5. YRDFA annual Yukon River Preseason Planning Meeting
6. YRDFA 30th Year Celebration

So, how do we prepare for the coming fishing season? YRDFA has



WRITTEN BY WAYNE JENKINS

been working closely with ADFG, USFWS and the YRITFC for alternative approaches for hosting our 2020 Preseason Planning meeting via a large teleconference. We decided to use our old reliable summer teleconferencing system; same day of the week, same time, same number as the best way to reach fishers and remote community members. The purpose of the call is the same as in our usual face-to-face meetings; Yukon River fishers and managers sharing information, asking questions and giving feedback from the river for preparing everyone for the fishing season ahead.

PRE-SEASON TELECONFERENCE
Call in date and time:
May 12, 2020 at 1pm
Call in number:
800/315-6338, Pin: 98566#

Due to heavy call volume, call in a few minutes early. If you cannot get on the call, hang-up and call back until you can get through. GCI is doing all they can to increase their capacity in response to the increased use of teleconferences due to the Coronavirus.

Please join the call and help us get the word out. Our fishery managers will be on the call sharing the information they have and ready to answer your questions and get your feedback in preparation for the challenging fishing season ahead.

YRDFA is also adding two early Teleconference calls for increased communications at this time. We will host these the last two Tuesdays of May for follow up to the May 12th call.

In closing, I gotta be frank, this is a tough piece to write. This is likely my last message to all the folks on the Yukon River I have had the privilege to meet and work directly with on fisheries and other issues during my years with YRDFA. Then, there are the fishery managers and scientists working to maintain health and balance in our runs, harvests, and conservation efforts. There are the other stakeholders and community members who also depend on the fish and health of the river for so much. And finally, the YRDFA Board and Alternates, members, and the great staff I have grown so close with. I cannot thank all of you enough for bringing me into your lives and communities, your struggles and successes, ongoing challenges, and surprises as we all strive together to use and care for the great Yukon River. You are a unique and wonderful mix of folks working on crucially important goals and issues. You will disagree, sometimes a lot, but never stop working together. Good luck and take good care of the fish! 🐟



Yukon Fisheries News is published by the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association
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Funding for this publication provided by the USFWS through the Restoration & Management Fund

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Welcome Aboard Serena Fitka



WRITTEN BY SERENA FITKA

Wagaa, it is an honor and privilege for me to introduce myself, Serena 'Cuucituar' Fitka, as the new Yukon Drainage Fisheries Association Executive Director. I am Yup'ik and grew up in St. Mary's, Alaska. My father, William Alstrom, grew up in Fish Village and later on in St. Mary's. My mother, Hilda 'Heckman' Alstrom grew up in Cuqarrtalek and moved to Pilot Station when she was 9. My grandparents are Tommy and Martina Heckman of Pilot Station and the late Fred and Domitilla Alstrom of St. Mary's. I currently live in Valdez, Alaska with my husband, Chris Fitka, and our three daughters, Hali, Kristen, and Lovisa. My education consists of not only living and working on the Yukon River, but also a degree in Business Administration in Management and Organizations. In addition, I have Leadership Distinction from the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

I grew up listening to fishery issues in our home; whether it was my dad talking to us kids; Gail, Arlene, and William II 'Bossa', or to the visitors who came to see our parents. The radio would blare everyday at 12:30, a familiar tune would ring out into the living room, as my dad would tell us to "be quiet." It was the 'Fish and Game Fishing Report'. I would

assume that's how it was in every home that survived on the fishing season in rural Alaska. After I graduated from high school, I worked for YRDFA conducting Elder interviews in our area. At that point in my life I truly began to understand the importance of traditional knowledge and the vitality of it being incorporated into the western culture. To this day I can recall the interviews as if it were yesterday and the knowledge of our Elders that have passed on; Mary Patsy, Marcia Thompson, David Sipary, Domitilla Alstrom, Irene Beans, and Andrew Paukan, they all have a special place in my heart. With their passing, tremendous knowledge has gone with them and now we walk on this earth as culture bearers to entrust the knowledge that was given to us in hopes it is maintained and passed onto the next generation.

I believe we are in a time where our voices need to be heard in order for the right actions to be made for the precious resources we are trying to preserve. I want to be able to listen to the concerns of the Yukon River communities with the guidance of my leadership values, which are strength, respect, and honesty. In a sense, these are simple and concise values, but they can be very powerful when applied in the right way.

I believe honesty should be within every facet in an organization, whether it be

in work, in management, or as individuals, it sets a foundation of trust and it is where relationships begin. Along with honesty is respect. YRDFA has forged a path of collaboration between all the communities along the Yukon River and it was because of honesty and respect for one another that built the success of the organization and it is incredible. Our communities have the strength when we stand together for the same cause. Thirty years ago, the people of the Yukon River gathered in a time of distress and all agreed on something; To protect the wild salmon runs of the Yukon River drainage and the indigenous cultures that are intertwined with it. Let's revive this strength of the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association by providing guidance to new leaders.

As I step into the Executive Director role, I want to take this opportunity to thank Wayne for all his hard work and dedication to the people of the Yukon River communities. He has made the transitional period as easy as possible during this challenging time. I wish him well in his next adventure and hope he will keep in contact with us.

In closing, I am excited in continuing the remarkable work of the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association and building upon the vision for the next 30 years.

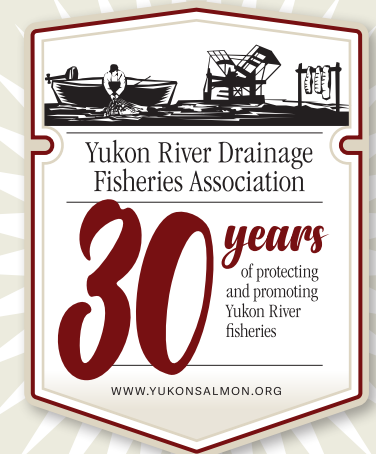


YRDFA Celebrates 30 Years

WRITTEN BY SERENA FITKA

A historic gathering took place 30 years ago in the community of Galena, on the Yukon River. Leaders from the lower and upper river communities flew into Galena to discuss the dwindling salmon runs. I got a chance to talk with Richard Burnham, who has been with YRDFA from the beginning. As I listened to his story I felt the energy of the people and his yearning to continue the work YRDFA created for the people of the Yukon River. "It [the meeting] was loud, people blew-up" recalled Richard Burnham of Kaltag. Emotions were high that day, but it was necessary for the honesty to come because they knew they needed to 'clear the air' before anything could be done. Burnham remembers, "Sidney Huntington and his son, Roger, stood up and said to everyone, 'now you got a chance

to vent and said what you wanted. Now, how can we work together' the room fell silent"? The importance of working together is as true today as it was when the first meeting took place in 1990. The next year the meeting took place in St. Mary's and the first board was elected, Harry Wilde Sr., Richard Burnham, Gilbert Huntington, Virgil Umphenour, Ernest Chase, Nick Tucker Sr., Bill Fliris, John Joe Evan, Eddie Bergman, Richard Peter. We honor those who have passed on and those who continue to serve YRDFA. YRDFA is planning to have a celebration during our upcoming Annual meeting, so please stay tuned for dates. We also ask for anyone with stories or pictures of this historic meeting to contact our office. Let us continue to work together for future generations.



The Time for Conservation is Now

WRITTEN BY STEPHANIE QUINN-DAVIDSON, PH.D., DIRECTOR OF YUKON RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION, TANANA CHIEFS CONFERENCE AND BROOKE WRIGHT, DIRECTOR AND CHAIR OF THE FISH COMMISSION

In 2013, the Yukon River experienced one of the lowest king salmon returns on record. The run came in much lower than what scientists and managers had expected and attempts to shift the management plan came too little, too late. At the end of the season, it turned out that the run was so small that even if no harvest had occurred, we still would not have met escapement goals.

In response to 2013, Tribes came together in 2014 to support a river-wide moratorium on king salmon fishing. Fishery managers, not wanting to repeat 2013, instituted significant management measures to protect king salmon. Everyone seemed to be on the same page; that conservation for future generations was a top priority. Fishermen adapted to using new gear that allowed the safe release of king salmon while targeting abundant summer chum salmon. They found new places to fish where they could target good numbers of chum salmon without harvesting king salmon. Others learned new ways of preserving other species of salmon, whitefish, and sheefish to supplement their low king salmon harvest.

The result? The 2014 run came in better than expected and the escapement goal

at the Canadian border was met for the first time in several years, but at a significant cost; the lowest subsistence harvest of king salmon on record. You, the people of the Yukon River, showed us what ultimate sacrifice looks like and you found a way to conserve king salmon so that your children and grandchildren could harvest king salmon in the future.

Thankfully, king salmon runs on the Yukon have slowly started to increase since those years. Management restrictions have relaxed and people have gone back to relying more on king salmon again. Some have continued to support conservation efforts despite the increased run sizes, and have adapted their fishing methods to catch fewer king salmon or to protect large females. But overall, the harvest of king salmon on the Yukon River has increased in recent years. While harvest has increased, until this past year, it was still well below the amount necessary for subsistence.

We know that fishermen on the Yukon River never take more than they need. We know this is a fundamental value of every single fisherman on the river. Unfortunately, even though things are better than what the Yukon faced in 2013, the king salmon run is still not rebuilt to

its historical numbers. You've heard a handful of fishermen say it for years: we are not out of the woods yet.

There are two decision points that impact the future of the Yukon River king salmon. The first is with the fishery managers. Fishery managers do their best to provide opportunity if the run size indicates there are enough king salmon in the river. But it's not a perfect science, with so many environmental factors at play. The second is with you, the fishermen. When there is an opening, your decisions on where to fish, how to fish, and what to fish in that opening directly impact future runs.

COVID-19 is throwing another hurdle our way this season and we know there will be a greater need for wild, traditional foods in our villages. But we also know that the response to the 2013 run proved that Yukon River fishermen are resilient, creative, selfless, and adaptive. You are stewards.

The future of the Yukon River king salmon run is up to the fishermen on this river. What future do you want for your children and grandchildren? And what actions are you willing to take now to ensure that future? 🐟

In-Season Salmon Survey Program Funded for 4 More Years!

WRITTEN BY CATHERINE MONCRIEFF

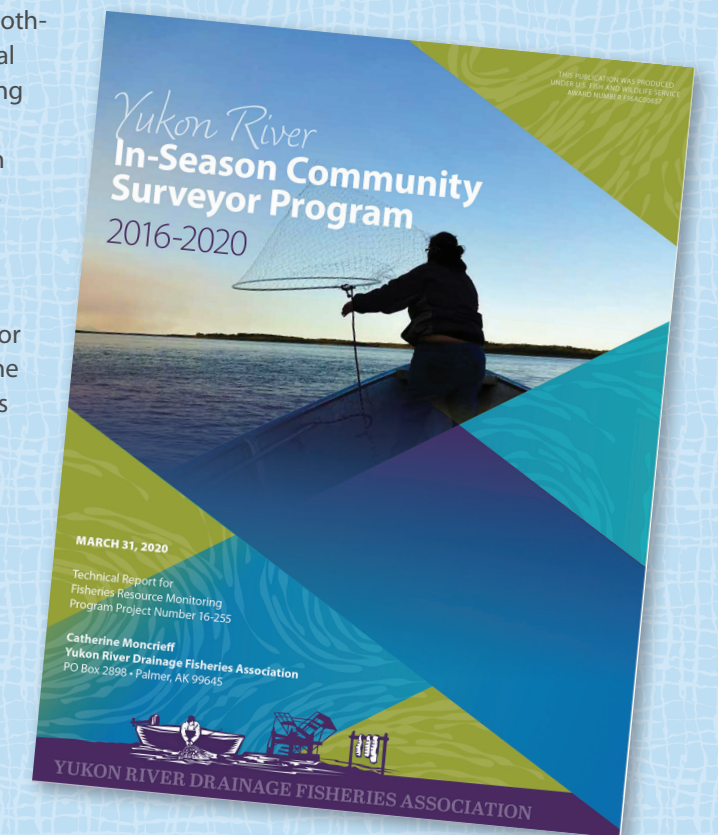
We are very happy to announce that the In-Season Yukon River Subsistence Salmon Survey Program has been approved for funding for the next 4 years. The new cycle began April 1, 2020 and will run through March 31, 2024. The Technical Report for the past 4-year period, 2016-2020, has been completed and distributed. If you did not get a copy yet, please contact YRDFA or look at our website, www.yukonsalmon.org.

The In-season Subsistence Salmon Survey program is gearing up for the 2020 fishing season with some adaptations for the Covid-19 pandemic travel restrictions. One of the changes for this year will be that the annual surveyor training event will take place by teleconference rather than the usual in-person meeting in association with the annual Yukon River Pre-Season Planning meeting. Another change planned will be surveying fishers with social distancing in mind if restrictions stretch into the fishing season. Communities that have been participating and will be invited again include: Alakanuk, Mountain Village, Marshall, Russian Mission, Anvik, Ruby, Huslia, Tanana, Fort Yukon, and Eagle.

The purpose of the In-season Subsistence Salmon Survey program is to provide a communication tool for both fishers and managers to communicate during the fishing season about fishing successes and challenges and to share important observations and concerns. Locally hired surveyors in 10 communities, stretching along the Yukon River from Alakanuk to Eagle, talk with fishers weekly about their subsistence fishing experiences. YRDFA and the surveyors summarize their information, make sure it is anonymous, and share it with the managers and the rest of the river through weekly In-season Salmon Management Teleconferences. 🐟



Surveyor Basil Larson of Russian Mission



Draanjik Field Work Postponed Due to Covid-19

The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) and the Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC) continue to partner with communities and people knowledgeable about the Draanjik basin in the upper Yukon River drainage to identify salmon and whitefish locations. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated travel bans, the project investigators have requested an extension for this project.

Activities remaining in this project include biological field work scheduled for spring, summer, and fall to confirm

anadromous fish locations, specifically Chinook, chum and coho salmon. This work will hopefully enable nominations to the Catalog of Waters Important for the Spawning, Rearing, or Migration of Anadromous Fishes and protect water bodies supporting life functions of salmon or whitefish. While the spring field work has been postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and travel bans, we are currently waiting to see if we will be able to conduct the summer and fall field work. Additionally, this project includes community meetings to share prelimi-

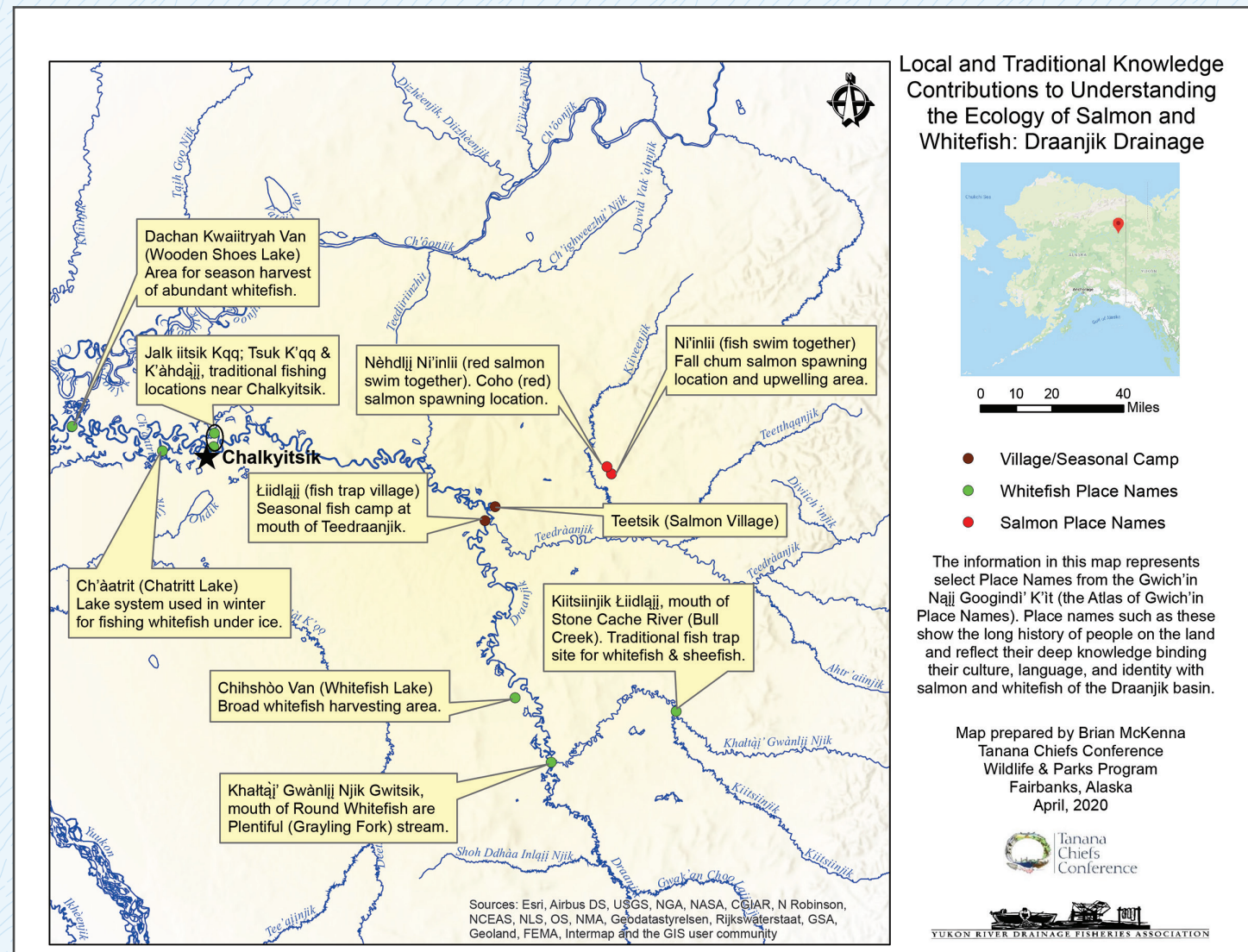
nary results and gather feedback. These meetings will be scheduled once travel to the communities is allowed or alternative approaches will be explored such as teleconference meetings and mailings.

This map is a small slice of the knowledge held by local and traditional knowledge holders in the Draanjik basin. It highlights important traditional place names identifying salmon and whitefish locations within the Draanjik basin. These place names are documented in the Gwich'in Najji Googindi' K'it, or "places where

the Gwich'in people have been," an interactive, online Atlas of Gwich'in place names and stories that show the long history and deep knowledge of the people who live, and have lived, in this area. The information comes from experts from Gwich'in communities. It was created through a collaborative effort of the Council of Athabaskan Tribal Governments, the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, the Alaska Native Place Names Project, and the Exchange for Local Observations and Knowledge of the Arctic.

These place names are important to this project because they identify salmon and whitefish areas that are well known to local people who harvest their food from the land and water but are not yet identified in the Anadromous Waters Catalog. Two examples are Nee'inlii and Nèhdlji Ni'inlii which are chum and coho salmon spawning sites on the Kevinjik Creek documented by David Salmon. These place names and the information shared during the ethnographic interviews for this project will inform the biological field work and pinpoint areas in which the team will attempt to sample and document anadromous fish to enable nominations to the Anadromous Waters Catalog.

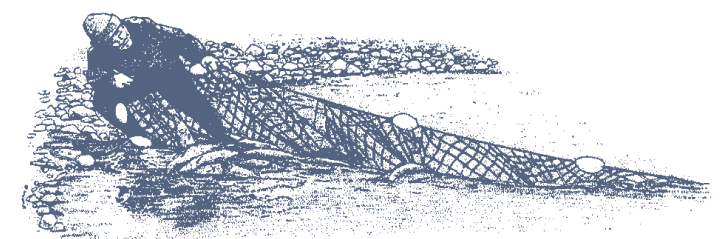
Thank you to the communities and knowledgeable participants for supporting and participating in this project. Thank you also to the Regional Advisory Councils and the US Fish and Wildlife Service Fisheries Resource Monitoring Program for funding this project.



2020 Yukon River Fall Outlook

BY JEFF ESTENSEN, ADF&G YUKON AREA FALL SEASON MANAGER

The drainage wide outlook for fall chum salmon in 2020 is a range from 827,000 – 1,045,000 fish. A fall chum salmon run of this size would be sufficient to meet escapement, treaty objectives, and provide for subsistence harvest. Coho salmon runs tend to follow four to five-year cycles, alternating between higher and lower abundances. We appear to be entering the 2nd year of a lower abundance cycle. The average run size for coho salmon is about 240,000. Regardless of the operational status of assessment projects, the department anticipates all districts and subdistricts to be on full regulatory subsistence fishing schedules with the use of up to 7.5-inch net during the fall season. Subsistence fishing restrictions, such as a restricted schedule or full closure, in the U.S. portion of the Porcupine River is likely. The amount of commercial fishing opportunity will be dependent on the operational status of the mainstem sonar near Pilot Station, which is uncertain at this time. The fall season begins by regulation in the lower river July 16. A lot will likely change between now and then, and the department will strive to keep fishermen up to date on events that will affect fall season via the weekly YRDFA teleconferences, Facebook, Advisory Announcements, and other means. Thank you and stay healthy!



When the going gets tough... CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

of summer chum. This is one way that people can increase food provisions for their families, while reducing the numbers of Chinook salmon. Fishermen can expect gillnets to be restricted to 6-inch or smaller mesh this summer. This is a management tool we've used for over 7 years. As fishermen invest in this gear, they have more options available to meet their needs each season. The use of 6 inch mesh also catches smaller fish, letting the bigger fish make it to the spawning grounds. Fishermen are also

encouraged to use dip nets, these have smaller catches but allow fishermen in chum-abundant areas to better target their harvests of Chinook and chum. Dipnets are always legal during gillnet openings.

Even if there are summer season restrictions to limit harvest of Chinook, full subsistence fishing is anticipated in the fall season, and families should plan accordingly. While we're going through this pandemic, it's important to remember

that what we do now affects the Chinook salmon for the next 7 years! Fishermen across the entire Yukon river have been working together to make sure we don't over-harvest the Chinook salmon, and this work has been paying off! We have seen run sizes in the last few years that have provided good subsistence harvests and have allowed us to meet our escapement goals. I sincerely thank you for your efforts to help keep the salmon runs sustainable and hope you and your families stay safe and healthy. 🐟



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Y-2, Alt. 2	Duane Thompson	Mountain Village
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Y-6, Alt. 1	Candace Charlie	Minto
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PICTURED LEFT TO RIGHT:

Tim McManus, Richard Burnham, Bill Alstrom, Stan Zuray, Andrew Firmin, Fred Huntington Sr., Victor Lord, Pollock Simon, Robert Okitkun, Michael James, Charlie Wright, Alfred Demientieff Jr.





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