



YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

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Dear Alaska State Legislators,

The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) is a recognized 501 (c)(3) non-profit association of subsistence and commercial fishers with the mission of protecting and promoting all healthy fisheries and cultures along the Yukon River drainage. This longest salmon migration in the world provides critical dietary and cultural support for over 50 rural Alaskan villages and a dozen First Nations communities in Yukon Territory, Canada. YRDFA was created in 1990 to conserve Yukon River salmon runs by giving a voice to the people who have used and managed the resource for thousands of years. Our work has become an essential part of the communications between Yukon River fishermen and fishery managers.

The issue we are focusing on is the salmon crisis in the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) region. A steady, multi-decade salmon decline on the AYK has been marked with periodic chum and Chinook stock crashes, culminating in a season of record loss in 2021 for chum salmon and a 2022 record low for Chinook salmon for the Yukon River. Since 2019, there has been zero commercial or subsistence harvest of Chinook or summer chum on the Yukon River, and many stocks fell below the necessary in-river escapement goals. We are looking for a statewide collaboration to examine and address issues impacting the health of these iconic wild salmon stocks. This is a critical matter of well-being in our region, impacting the health of our food systems, livelihoods, family structures, cultural traditions, and more. Since the recent Alaska Peninsula / Aleutian Chain/ Chignik Board of Fisheries meeting in February was unable to adhere to the laws put in place to ensure escapement goals and subsistence needs are met, the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association supports Senate Bill 128.

After listening to the testimony of opposition to Senate Bill 128 during the Judiciary Committee on April 21, 2023 I wanted to add some context to address some of the comments that were made.

The shutdown of Area M fisheries will disrupt people's lives. People will move out, foreclose on their boats, houses, etc.

Just as in any other fishery in Alaska, we [Yukon River people] have seen our fair share of changes. The Yukon River people had to change their gear types over the years. It is a huge undertaking to come up with the funds to keep purchasing different types of gear every year. To spend money on a net for the upcoming season and for it to be illegal the following season makes a huge impact to those who barely make the cost of living in the rural communities. We have been reduced to 4 inch mesh for non-salmon species. Many people on the Yukon River do not own a 4 inch mesh net. We have also been reduced in time and area. To conserve the salmon, we were moved from a 24/7 subsistence schedule to 72 hour windows, 48 hour windows to zero opportunity. For commercial fishermen in the lower river many have moved out of their communities, many had their only boat/motor repossessed, many have become dependent on financial assistance for income. With all the changes that we have endured over the years, we have abided by the system, adapted to the changes. Now, we have nothing else to give.

I can hear the frustration in the Area M fishermen as they testify. They have not endured restrictions since their existence. They have other species to rely on whereas the in-river users do not. Time is money, but when the renewable resource is in jeopardy it is common sense to put more restrictions in place otherwise you're going to run this fishery into the ground. The Board of Fish put more restrictions in place for the Yukon River when escapement goals were not met. However great the loss may be in closing Area M commercial salmon fishery it cannot be compared to the subsistence and cultural loss we have seen occurring to the AYK people.

Use science. Area M is not the major contributor to the decline in the AYK region.

Science does play a role. It has been documented that chum salmon that are bound for the AYK region are intercepted in Area M. In 2021, Area M harvested 1.168 million chum salmon, which most of the harvest occurred in June in the South Unimak and Shumagin Island fishery. Of the total harvest and using science; the interception of AYK chum salmon was between 210,000 to 665,000 chum salmon using the genetics from the WASSIP study. In 2021, while the Yukon River was completely shut down for commercial and subsistence harvest opportunities for chum salmon the Pilot Station sonar summer chum count was **153,710**¹.

There have been many questions surrounding the recent study in 2022. The accuracy and the integrity of the sampling. "How does the Department expect us to trust the study when you have the processors conducting the sampling? Aren't the processors the ones who do not want restrictions put in place?" "Can you tell the difference between the Asian hatchery salmon and a wild salmon? The sampling can be off by the processors taking the samples." These were some of the comments and questions we received from Yukon River fishermen. I personally reached out to the Department and to the genetics lab to request a brief description of the research for our Yukon River In-season teleconference in 2022. I received no response.

¹ https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=commercialbyareayukon.salmon_escapement

We understand that there are many factors that are contributing to the decline of the AYK salmon stocks; however, we cannot continue to put off the responsibility of human control. We cannot control the climate, the warming of the ocean or the diseases.

We sympathize with the AYK region. We are keeping a close eye on the situation. We will regulate ourselves.

The subsistence dependent people in all the rural communities are without a major source of protein and nutrients that contribute to their health and well being. The cultural loss makes a huge impact in our communities. All the Yukon River communities have not been able to enact their cultural practices around salmon. This is a humanitarian issue. The only movement was a small reduction in fishing time and trigger points.

By providing a small reduction in fishing time will not assist with rebuilding stocks that are bound to the AYK region. It will not happen in a year. With the ongoing distrust in Area M fishermen it is clear that self-regulation is not the way to move forward. With the concerns of 'chum chucking' the trigger points will not work unless there are cameras put in place to observe activity.

We all appreciate the fish being sent to the communities; however, it is not the same as harvesting your own food. "Give a man a fish, and he eats for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." a Chinese proverb. Our cultural practices have not sustained us by receiving handouts. We will soon become dependent people; living off the assistance of the State and Federal government, which will far exceed the expense of closing a fishery during a crisis.

The Yukon River is a turning point in our fisheries. We can no longer be the only ones bearing the burden of conservation of our salmon. We have nothing left to contribute. This needs to be a joint effort by all areas that affect the returns of the AYK salmon stocks. The bottom line is we are comparing a commercial salmon fishery to a subsistence salmon fishery. These are two different types of management regimes and subsistence priority supersedes commercial. The decisions that are made on this issue will be a reflection of the courage to take a stand or falter at expense of economic benefit over basic human rights.

Quyana for your time. Please reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Serena Fitka". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Serena Fitka
Executive Director