



A Common Site in 2014: King Salmon Damaged by 4" Set Nets

Deadly Gear: My Thoughts on the Use of 4" Mesh Nets:

Yesterday you heard a lot of testimony in opposition to the use of 4" nets – how they damage and kill King Salmon. Nobody knows how many Kings were lost during the 2014 fishing season. In the lower River many hit the hundreds of set nets – there were 140 documented 4" set nets in the 9 miles between the lower end of Church Slough and Napaskiak (see ONC in-season subsistence reports) on the incoming tide, some drown only to be ripped out on the outgoing tide, others sat in those nets struggling for hours to get free, damaging themselves in their drive to get home to spawn.

Today I would like to tell you about my experience with these nets in 2014.

In 2012 people were allowed to drift or set with 4" nets during the restrictions. My friends in the Lower River who took advantage of this opportunity using the "new style 4" mesh nets" told me that type of gear was "deadly".

Last year I found out for myself. Knowing that the use of 4" nets was going to be allowed I called Donaldson's in Anchorage to order a new net. The first question they asked was, "Do you want it hung for salmon?"

I asked them what that meant. They told me:

- Single strand mono-filament
- Heavier lead line
- Regular salmon net cork line

Like any good fisherman that wants to catch fish – my intention was to target Reds and Chum – and for their gear to last I said yes. I think the 60' net was \$265 with postage.

THESE ARE NOT THE LIGHT LITTLE 4" WHITEFISH NETS OF OUR FATHERS & GRANDFATHERS. THEY ARE MADE TO TARGET SALMON.

With my brand new 4" net I set out to abide by the conservation measures. I used the net as a set net at first, but good eddies in the Middle Kuskokwim are few and far between. The two that are close to Napaimute to be economically feasible (price of gas) are both shallow – 3' to 5' deep at normal water levels – last year was low water in June. I wasn't catching anything but my net was getting dirtier and dirtier.

So one day I decided to drift it to clean it – because we were in State water we were allowed to drift. In Federal water from Aniak on down you could only use 4" as set nets. As I was drifting it I caught 5 large Kings – I was so amazed that I kept them. In a regular year 5 Kings in a long drift with a 50 fathom 6" net would be a good drift!

In the day after that discovery I kept drifting that little net using a little 14' boat with an old 15hp for better control – even thought of going back to rowing.

Like my friends told me: that net was deadly! I could fish with that net the rest of my life and be happy. It was easy to throw, easy to drift, easy to pull in. Whenever a fish hit the net I would let it loose from the boat and run out to check it.

If it was a King I would let it go – I released 60 Kings from that little net and they were all medium to large something we haven't seen upriver in many years. There were very few small/jack Kings – they were getting caught in the 100's of 4" set nets downriver.

Chums and Reds were carefully hauled in and kept – we caught about 80 Reds and Chums.

In one drift I sank that deadly little net. I physically shook out 12 large Kings – there were a handful more that got out on their own. I quit and went back home. Practically in tears I told my wife, "I can't do this anymore. This isn't what subsistence is about – catching and letting go. I'm going to start keeping some."

I was getting firsthand reports from friends down river that had multiple 4" set nets that had caught over 80 Kings and counting. One of them even testified in a KRSMWG meeting. As long as it was legal to keep Kings caught in 4" People were going to keep doing it.

My oldest daughter was sitting at the kitchen table listening to my ranting. She told me, "You can't do that – you'll be a hypocrite!" So I told her to come with me and see how it is.

We went back out to drift. A few minutes into our first drift – 40' out a bunch of corks went down and bobbed hard. We went out to check. My daughter is 24 years old and she never seen that before in her life growing up in the Middle River. There was a 60lb size King stuck in the net. She was in awe. I held it loosely in the water asking her, "You still want to let it go? You still want to let it go?" She quietly said, "You have to." I shook it loose. It faded away into the water.



One of many large Kings released from a "new style 4" net" in 2014

In each drift that deadly little net would grab everything that was swimming in the River: Suckers, Whitefish, Sheefish, Chums, Reds, and of course Kings. We couldn't let all of the Kings go – some were too injured. Some of them would fight hard pull that small net out of the water and wrap the lead line over the cork line. The only way to get them out of the net was to bring them in the boat. Once onboard they would beat themselves bloody to get free while I tried to untangle them as fast as possible. Letting them go would be like shooting an animal, wounding it, then turning your back on it. I can't do that.

So with all that said, I'm not sure what the answer is.

- Making 4" set net only will lead to saturation of the River with set nets which is burden in the Middle and Upper River where set net sites are very few. Meanwhile many Kings in the Lower River will be caught and kept. An unknown number will be lost – damaged or killed outright. I think it is substantial but there's no way to prove it other than some of the testimonies given yesterday.
- Allowing for 4" to be drifted allows for a conservation-minded fisher to release Kings almost immediately without harm in most cases. Some will have to be kept because they are just too wounded.
- Completely banning the use of 4" nets in the main-stem Kuskokwim and all anadromous streams or only allowing windows of opportunity for 4" nets might have to be considered.
- Requiring 4" nets used as set nets to be checked every 6 hrs. – like the requirement for fish wheels

Thank you for your consideration.