

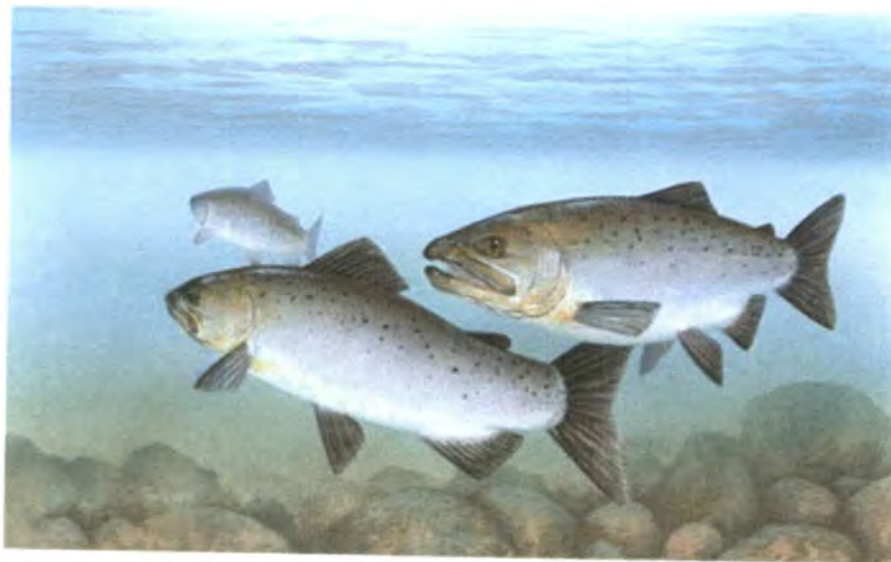
RC 108



CONSERVING THE KENAI KINGS

PROPOSAL 219

In-season Closures of Important Spawning Areas



*“When salmon runs are at risk, conservation must
be given a priority”*

Kenai Area Fisherman's Coalition is a private angler group that formed in 2007 to provide a voice for private anglers and promote conservation of our resources for future generations to enjoy. We have 8 past ADF&G or USF&W fisheries biologists on our Board of Directors or in our membership.

Proposal 219 Position Paper

Note: "The fact is that the management of our fisheries has not changed sufficiently to reflect the demands of an ever-increasing population and the large growth sport fishery that has developed."

Proposal 219 seeks to provide King salmon spawning protection in the middle Kenai River by incorporating 2 spawning conservation zones that would kick in during the season as fish move upriver into some of our most productive spawning areas.

The Kenai River is the only major stream on the Kenai Peninsula that does not provide mainstem spawning protection for the majority of our King salmon;

Anchor R.

Deep Cr.

Ninilchik R.

All only allow fishing for King salmon in the lower 2 mi. and only on several weekends per summer.

Kasilof R.

Closes to King salmon fishing above the Sterling Hwy. Bridge after July 1 to protect spawning Kings.

Note: On the Kenai R. we allow fishing throughout the mainstem from tidewater to Skilak Lk. all season long from May thru July.

How Prop. 219 Would Work:

The season would start normal allowing property owners and other fishermen an opportunity to fish for King salmon throughout the system.

As the season progresses and fish move upstream into important spawning areas 2 periodic middle river closures would take place.

The King fishery below the Soldotna Bridge would be allowed to continue on harvestable stocks throughout the season to provide for a vibrant sport and guided sport fishery.

Spawning Conservation Area 1 July 1 – July 31 Close the area from the Moose River (RM36) – Skilak Lk. (RM50) to King salmon fishing.

To protect ER tributary and mainstem Kings moving into or through that area for spawning purposes.

Spawning Conservation Area 2 July 10 – July 31 Close the area from the Sterling Hwy Bridge in Soldotna (RM21) to the Moose River (RM36) to King salmon fishing.

To protect both ER and LR tributary and mainstem fish moving into or through that area for spawning purposes.

Note: Fishing for all other species would still be allowed in these areas

Why Are These Spawning Closures Important:

- ∞ The ER is in decline both in numbers and quality of the spawning component.
 - Data illustrates that the ER has declined by about 65 – 70% since 2007 compared to a 30 -40% decline in the LR despite the fact that there is no commercial fishing on these stocks.

- ∞ The quality of the ER Spawning potential has declined so much that it may not meet the needs for stock recovery.
 - 2013 Killey R. weir data showed 73% were 1.1 & 1.2 jacks averaging 25in or less. 2013 Funny R. 51% were jacks.
 - 2013 Killey R. only 14% were females and in the Funny R. only 24% were females.
 - 2013 Killey R. only had 11% 1.4 fish and Funny R. only had 10%.
 - The ER Total run abundance report shows that between 2002 – 2012 approx. 44% of the total run was represented by 1.4 age class fish.
 - The 1.4 age class of big Kings coming into the Kenai R. represents the largest number of big Kings. Between 1986 – 2013 harvest reports indicate that 58% of the ER and 66% of the LR harvests were made up of 1.4 age class fish.

Note: The mainstem spawning component may be in even bigger trouble because they have not received any spawning protection over the years when restrictions were not in place.

- ∞ **The ER mainstem spawning component is the only King salmon sub-stock that does not receive any protection from harvest during spawning. Data shows that they generally spawn around July 20 – late July. Because they enter the river in May & June they are available for harvest longer than any other King salmon in the system and they are regularly fished on their spawning beds. Tributary fish receive protection once they enter their sanctuary areas and LR Kings don't spawn until mid-August, well after the season closes. We even have a closure to protect rainbows but nothing for ER mainstem Kings.**

- ∞ **ER mainstem fish are bigger than tributary fish. Data illustrates that, across the age classes, Mainstem fish are 1-4 in. bigger than Killey R. fish and 3-9in bigger than Funny R. Fish.**

- ∞ **Department ER / EO restrictive measures above Slikok Cr. don't adequately protect ER mainstem spawners that remain downriver of that area on July 1, when LR regulations begin with harvest opportunities. Recent telemetry information suggests that an average of 55% of ER mainstem Kings are still below Slikok Cr. on July 1.**

Note: That is why these closures would be very important in getting our bigger fish back in the system.

- ∞ **The 2nd closure above the Soldotna Bridge would insure protection for both ER and LR fish that spawn in that area.**

Note: We believe , that these two closures will provide us with the best opportunity at providing spawning certainty to help us recover our King salmon stocks and provide for future sustainability for future generations to enjoy.

What Else Will These Closures Accomplish:

- ∞ It will reduce the effects of selective harvest of continually taking our biggest and best breeders out of the system.

Note: Recent research information now suggests that targeting the largest Kings may have some lasting affects on the characteristics of the stocks. Size selectivity over time can cause future returning fish to be smaller, fewer in numbers and contain a greater ratio of males than in more productive times.

Note: These are all symptoms that we are currently seeing in our Kenai Kings.

- ∞ It will reduce the effects of a sport harvest that targets females to collect roe for bait future trips. Sport harvest data shows that we take more females than males.
- ∞ It will reduce catch and release mortality. It will also reduce the affects of taking a King off of its spawning bed, fighting it, then releasing it far downstream, whereby, it may not complete its spawning cycle.
- ∞ Providing these spawning certainties would also reduce the effects of sonar counting irregularities. In 2013 for instance the sonar count showed 2,038, however, the sonar actually only counted 900 – 1,000 fish. The rest were added by test netting calculations and an adjustment for fish traveling along the bank outside of the sonar detection area.

Note: To put this into perspective.... The low end of the escapement goal for the little Anchor River is 3,800 and look at all the fishing power we have on the Kenai river.

Department Restrictions and EO's Aren't Enough

- ∞ **During the last two seasons the department closed the waters upriver of Slikok Creek (RM19) to King salmon fishing to protect the ER fish. We also believe this demonstrates their regards for how important those protected waters are to insure spawning protection.**

While we appreciate the department's concerns for our Kenai King stocks and the protective restrictions they have put in place the last couple of years, we believe the Department's EO's and restrictions don't adequately protect our King salmon stocks enough to accomplish what is needed to reduce the selective exploitation on the mainstem component.

As long as we continue the present harvest methods, on fishable stocks, we will never accomplish meaningful stock recovery unless we set aside some protective spawning areas whereby those practices are not a factor and stock diversity is allowed to exist on the spawning beds in its natural state.

We have to have an area where selective harvest of our biggest fish, selective harvest targeting females, catch & release mortality and disturbance on the spawning beds is not a factor or we will unnecessarily perpetuate our problems well into the future.

Recent research also suggest that it probably took us 5 – 6 stock generations (about 35 - 40 years) to create these problems. It also notes that even with adequate conservation measures it will probably take 3 generations or more to recover the stocks back to their original state (about 18 – 20 years).

Note: That is why we can't afford to wait any longer before incorporating meaningful conservation measures to recover and protect this valuable resource.

Conclusions

Over the last couple of UCI BOF meetings the BOF has concentrated their efforts on trying to find ways to reduce the number of Kenai Kings harvested in the commercial fisheries. While we appreciate their considerations in this regard, we also believe that how we treat these fish once they enter the river system is even more important. Please remember that we catch twice as many Kings in the sport fishery as in the commercial fishery and we do it in a more destructive manner.

Over the past 35 years we have been part of one of the largest and most intense sport and guided sport fisheries in the world. In that time we have inflicted a lot of damage on this valuable resource. We have continuously targeted some of our most critical spawning areas. Spawning fish, by nature, are aggressive protectors of their spawning beds and easier targets when other harvest opportunities are more challenging.

Then there is the long list of lasting and negative affects tied to years of selective harvest practices. If we're going to keep promoting the value of our King fishery on the concept of, "Come to the Kenai and fish a river that has the largest King salmon in the world", and keep killing our biggest and best breeders then it is incumbent on us to offer these fish some area of complete protection.

Through the "Human Effect" we have caused these in-river problems for our precious Kenai Kings. Now it is up to us to provide a better outcome for their survival. KAFC believes that providing these spawning conservation areas is the answer and it is critical to start this conservation effort now rather than later.

The fish have to come first!!!!
**We are their caretakers and they rely on us to
manage for their survival**

