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ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES

NORTON SOUND CHUM SALMON FINDINGS

APRIL 17, 1992

At the Alaska Board of Fisheries regularly scheduled meeting in Bethel, February 4 - 11, 1992, the Board took action on Proposal 291, concerning subsistence fisheries for pink and chum salmon stocks in Norton Sound.

The meeting was publicly noticed as required by AS 44.64.190 - .210, including notice of the opportunity for members of the public to testify during the meeting. At the meeting the Board heard oral testimony from the public, reviewed a considerable volume of written comment received from the public, and received Advisory Committee and Regional Council reports.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Divisions of Commercial Fisheries and Subsistence ("Department") staff presented written and oral reports that provided the Board with a comprehensive review of the fish stocks and fisheries in Norton Sound.

Based upon this information and Board deliberations the Board finds that there is a serious conservation problem regarding chum salmon stocks in several northern Norton Sound river systems in Subdistrict 1 (the Nome subdistrict). Another northern Norton Sound subdistrict, Moses Point (Subdistrict 3), is experiencing depressed runs and difficulty meeting escapement goals despite limited commercial fishing in recent years.

I. NOME SUBDISTRICT

A. CONSERVATION CONCERNS

Key chum salmon streams in the Nome subdistrict have experienced spawning escapements significantly below established escapement goals in recent years. This has resulted in increasingly restrictive management of commercial, sport and subsistence fisheries since the mid-1980's. The success of fisheries management options to meet escapement goals to assure sustained yield has been to some degree dependent on factors beyond the control of the local managers. Those factors include: decreased fresh water survival due to

high water during spawning and/or freeze down during harsh winters, unanticipated harvests, and local and non-local and salt water survival, i.e. various stocks competing for limited resources. In addition, in the early 1980s high commercial harvests combined with heavy subsistence use in the Nome subdistrict apparently caused the Nome chum stocks to decline.

By 1990 escapement in the subdistrict had declined to one-fourth of established goals. During the 1991 season it was necessary to close commercial and sport fisheries totally, and to maintain an extensive subsistence closure during the early part of the season. The subsistence closure was relaxed only after the majority of the chum salmon run had passed and it was clear that adequate spawning would occur. As a result of these measures escapement objectives for most Nome subdistrict streams were able to be met in 1991. This was the first year the Nome River escapement objective had been met since 1984.

In summary, the Board found that escapements in the Nome subdistrict have been chronically below escapement goals established to maintain sustained yields despite significant management actions such as complete closure of the commercial and sport fisheries and a necessary restriction of the subsistence fishery. For the 1992 fishing season the Department of Fish and Game reported that it would probably be necessary to close commercial and sport fishing in the subdistrict and restrict subsistence fishing until the pink salmon run arrives in mid-July in order to maximize escapement of chums. Even with these measures the chum salmon escapement goals may not be met.

B. HISTORY OF BOARD OF FISHERIES AND DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME ACTIONS TO PROTECT NOME SUBDISTRICT CHUM SALMON

The Board also considered reports from the Department regarding the fishing since 1963 and management actions taken since the early 1980's to conserve and rebuild depressed Nome subdistrict chum salmon stocks.

These actions for the Nome subdistrict were initiated in 1982 when management staff reduced fishing time to limit commercial harvests. During following years the length of commercial seasons was reduced, weekly fishing periods were reduced, and half the commercial district was closed to fishing.

By 1984, commercial fisheries in the Nome subdistrict had been reduced to very low levels and sport fishery harvest limits were reduced. Commercial fishing west of Cape Nome including

the Nome River area was closed at that time and has remained closed. By 1988, the commercial harvest declined dramatically due to poor runs and lack of market. Sport fisheries harvest limits were further reduced in specified rivers. In addition, subsistence catch limits for depressed stocks were established. Subsistence gear restrictions set a maximum length of 50 feet for gill nets and disallowed subsistence beach seining in the Nome River. These restrictions served to decrease the impact of the subsistence fishery on any one spawning segment of the stock.

Since 1987, the Department has attempted to meet escapement objectives and still allow subsistence harvests by reducing commercial and sport fishery harvests by emergency order. As sport and subsistence restrictions became more severe in highly accessible streams in the Nome area, fishing effort shifted to more remote rivers in the subdistrict as well as adjacent subdistricts. By 1989 the Department was required to close sport fishing and subsistence fishing in the Nome River (the commercial fishery had already been closed). In 1991, the commercial and sport fisheries in the Nome subdistrict were closed by emergency order, and the subsistence fishery was severely restricted early in the season and was opened in-season for certain areas once escapements for stocks targeted in these areas were achieved.

C. POSSIBLE BOARD ACTIONS CONSIDERED TO REBUILD DEPRESSED NOME SUBDISTRICT CHUM SALMON STOCKS.

Consistent with past Board and ADF&G management actions the Board considered the chum salmon stocks in the Nome subdistrict (from Topkok Head to Cape Douglas) as a manageable unit. It reviewed actions that might be necessary to achieve adequate escapement of the Nome subdistrict chum salmon stocks. Since past Board and Department action had closed the commercial fishery in the Nome subdistrict there were not additional restrictions the Board could impose on the commercial fishery which would enhance escapement.

The Board considered regulatory changes to the chum salmon sport fisheries in the Nome subdistrict. Department staff reported that chum salmon sport harvests in the Nome subdistrict had historically been much larger than present levels and that chum salmon was a favored sport fishery species in this subdistrict. The Department had used its E.O. authority to close the Nome subdistrict in 1991 to chum salmon sport fishing and had submitted a staff proposal to the Board to close adjacent Norton Sound marine waters and freshwaters

draining the Nome subdistrict to chum salmon sport fishing for 1992.

Because the subsistence fishery was the only fishery that would still be open in the Nome subdistrict, the Board focused much of its attention on alternative actions it might take to conserve the chum stocks without further restricting the subsistence fishery.

The Board heard testimony from subsistence users from these areas who stressed how important the chum salmon resource was to their subsistence way of life and that given the depressed status of the chum stocks they were concerned that their subsistence needs would not be met. The Norton Sound Advisory Committee representative testified that if reductions were necessary to the subsistence opportunity in the Norton Sound area that the local subsistence users felt strongly that the Board should not implement the Tier II system because it was essential that everybody got at least some fish, rather than that fewer people had a greater opportunity to fish. The Advisory Committee representative also testified that it is possible for some local subsistence users to get enough salmon from the marine waters. The Advisory Committee representative reported that the Advisory Committee supported Proposal 291, but that the proposed limitation of gear to set nets of a maximum of 50 feet posed some difficulty because people could not afford to get new nets. Overall the Advisory Committee wanted the regulations left as they are.

The Subsistence Division provided historical information to the Board that the historic level of subsistence use in the Nome subdistrict was 124 salmon per household and that the subsistence permits were on a household basis. The Subsistence Division also provided information that Nome area as a whole consumed an historical average of 14,000 salmon for subsistence purposes. While chum salmon make up the largest single component of the catch substantial numbers of pink and coho salmon are also taken. The Subsistence Division also reported that the subsistence gear type was predominantly gill nets, and that beach seines were not in use mainly due to regulatory restrictions.

The Board considered four possible courses of action to determine what might be done with subsistence fisheries in the Nome subdistrict that would assist with conserving and rebuilding the depressed chum salmon stocks, yet cause the least restrictions on, and disruption to, the traditional subsistence fishery patterns. These included:

1. Adopt staff proposal 291 to modify subsistence fishing seasons and gear specifications to conserve chum salmon stocks in the Nome subdistrict.
2. Establish a Tier II fishery which would allow only certain qualified subsistence users to harvest chum salmon under subsistence permits.
3. Further reduce subsistence harvest limits for chum salmon where they currently exist and establish limits for stocks where there currently are none.
4. Retain the status quo by allowing the Department to use its emergency order authority to open and close the subsistence fishery to protect spawning escapements.

## II. MOSES POINT SUBDISTRICT

The Board also heard reports from the Department of Fish and Game regarding the depressed nature of Moses Point chum salmon stocks. Total returns have been low for the last five years and escapement goals have not been met despite reduced commercial fishing due to management restrictions and lack of markets for the fish.

During 1991, the commercial harvest was 803 chum salmon; subsistence harvests in the subdistrict are estimated at 3,000 fish per year. Escapement for the Kwiniuk River was 18,000 compared to the goal of 25,000, while escapement for the Tubutulik River was about 7,000 fish compared to the goal of 12,000.

Sport fishing harvests in the subdistrict are very low and catches are included in the subsistence harvest estimates. Options for the Moses Point subdistrict were more limited. No proposal had been submitted by the public or the staff concerning this subdistrict. Unlike the Nome subdistrict which has had a subsistence permit system in place for many years, the staff reported to the Board that implementing a Tier II fishery in the Moses Point subdistrict would be difficult because the subsistence users there were similarly situated to each other and would very likely all receive the same score.

## III. BOARD ACTIONS TO PROTECT NOME CHUM SALMON AND PROVIDE SUBSISTENCE FISHING OPPORTUNITY DURING 1992.

Given the complexity of the subsistence use patterns, and not wanting to disrupt subsistence users any more than necessary in order to conserve the Nome subdistrict chum salmon stocks, the Board amended proposal 291 to: (1) allow use of beach seines in the Nome subdistrict only during period established by Emergency Order; (2) retain the fixed weekly fishing periods; and (3) expand the area where the 50 foot length restriction for set gill nets applied to the entire Nome subdistrict. The purpose of these changes was to limit the impact of the subsistence fishery on individual segments of the spawning stock by restricting the use of gear capable of harvesting large numbers of fish from a single school. These changes will still allow subsistence fishing if there is a harvestable surplus available over the level necessary to meet spawning escapement objectives. The Board directed the Department to continue to use time and area closures as necessary to ensure spawning escapements are met.

While the Board found it necessary to continue some restriction on subsistence fishing for chum salmon in the Nome subdistrict to assure adequate spawning escapements, as a result of the Board's action, all streams in the Nome subdistrict will continue to remain open to subsistence fishing. The subsistence users will be able to maintain their traditional fish camps and will not have to relocate to more distant streams. The Board considered that the traditional way of subsistence fishing in the Nome area is that everyone should have an opportunity to fish, rather than the limitations of Tier II which would allow only certain qualified individuals to engage in subsistence fishing. As a result of the Board's action all subsistence users will have an opportunity to engage in subsistence openings, which would not have been possible if a Tier II system had been implemented. For those subsistence users who need more fish than allowed from the streams, the marine waters will remain open with no limit on subsistence harvest. The use of beach seine gear may still be allowed by Emergency Order if there is sufficient harvestable surplus over the spawning escapement objectives, so subsistence users will not necessarily have to shift to set net gear. The Board made no regulatory changes in the subsistence bag limits for chum salmon.

In the Moses Point subdistrict the Board directed the staff to continue to use time and area closures as necessary to ensure adequate spawning escapements and provide for subsistence.

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