

FINDINGS OF THE ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES

Regarding Upper Cook Inlet

District Set Gillnet Registration

(Previously Finding #93-03-FB)

During the Alaska Board of Fisheries public meeting held in Anchorage on November 8-20, 1992, the board considered department reports, oral and written public testimony, advisory committee reports, and deliberated and took action on a number of proposals to address conservation, development and allocation concerns of Upper Cook Inlet salmon stocks. Action on proposal 363 specifically dealt with conservation and development (allocation) concerns of salmon stocks in the Northern District of Cook Inlet. The action taken on proposal 363 incorporates the information provided by department staff, public comment, advisory board comment, and board deliberations on previous proposals dealing with similar issues in Cook Inlet.

To address the conservation and allocation concerns, the board adopted regulations that divide Cook Inlet into three registration areas; Northern District, Eastern Subdistrict of the Central District, and the remainder of Cook Inlet. Cook Inlet set gillnetters are required to choose only one of the three areas in which to fish in any one year. The board believes that these yearly exclusive registration regulations are necessary to serve the orderly conservation and development goals and stabilize the fisheries. In support of the regulations the board finds:

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I. CONSERVATION CONCERNS

The Board of Fisheries finds that there are conservation concerns regarding:

- 1) Yetna River sockeye salmon, which in five of the last seven years have not reached their escapement goal range of 100,000 to 150,000 fish.
- 2) Knik Arm coho salmon, which the Department post-season stream surveys indicate escapement levels to be far below observed levels of previous years which were considered normal.
- 3) Theodore, Lewis and Chuit River chinook salmon, which the Department stream surveys both in-season and post-season indicate escapement levels below average and far below observed levels of prior years.

These conservation concerns were repeatedly addressed throughout the Upper Cook Inlet portion of the meeting by Department staff, Advisory Committees, and oral and written public testimony.

The board has concerns that the projected poor sockeye returns to the Kenai River system in 1994 and 1995 will result in increased movement of setnetters and further impact these stressed stocks.

II. ACTIONS TAKEN TO PROTECT COOK INLET SALMON STOCKS

Some of the actions taken at this meeting to further protect salmon stocks in Cook Inlet are summarized as follows:

The Upper Cook Inlet Management Plan was modified to minimize Northern District king salmon harvest and coho salmon harvest after August 15. The Big River Sockeye Salmon Management Plan was reviewed by a committee comprised of Department staff and members of the public and the board further restricted harvest as recommended by the committee. Fishing time was reduced for Kalgin Island Subdistrict sockeye fishery. Restrictions were placed on the drift gillnet fishery after August 15 to protect Kenai River coho salmon. The board reduced salmon bag and possession limits and created a yearly limit of five king salmon in Northern District streams as well as restricting the use of bait in the sport fishery.

III. MANAGEMENT ACTIONS ADDRESSED FOR PROTECTING NORTHERN DISTRICT STOCKS.

1) During the meeting the Department staff reported the current management actions that it takes to minimize the catch of Northern District salmon stocks as they move through Cook Inlet. Time and area closures primarily to the drift gillnet fleet were utilized to the extent possible to minimize effort at the time and in the areas when and where Northern District salmon stocks are known to exist.

2) The difficulty of managing Cook Inlet salmon stocks as a whole while attempting to manage individual systems within Cook Inlet was explained. While certain Northern District stocks are being managed to reach minimum escapement goals, other Cook Inlet stocks are being managed to prevent overescapement. The staff explained the decision process and the effects of management decisions as they apply individually to each respective system, and to Cook Inlet as a whole.

3) It was further explained that the projected poor returns of sockeye salmon to the Kenai River for 1994 and 1995 based on weak smolt outmigration will likely result in increased mobile setnetting by Cook Inlet setnetters to target salmon stocks at peak fishing periods in areas of Cook Inlet.

4) In order to address the conservation concerns of the specific salmon stocks in the Northern District and to provide for a more orderly fishery to occur and to prevent movement of setnetters from the Eastside and Westside fisheries to move to the Northern District after they have already fished other districts, the board created three registration areas and restricted setnetters to fishing only one of the areas in any one year. Setnetters may choose the area they wish to fish each year. Once they land fish in one Cook Inlet registration area, they may not setnet in either of the other two Cook Inlet registration areas in the same year. The regulation does not prevent movement within the registration area chosen.

5) Without exclusive registration areas in Cook Inlet, the amount of effort on stocks in the

Northern District will increase during years of poor returns to other areas of Cook Inlet. The board considered that because of projected poor sockeye returns to the Kenai River during 1994 and 1995, more setnetters might choose to fish in the Northern District than would when returns to other Cook Inlet systems are at recent higher than normal levels. The registration areas will eliminate setnetter from fishing the lower beaches and then moving to fish the Northern District beaches during the same year. This will stabilize the setnet fishery in Cook Inlet.

6) The board considered the allocation criteria and found as follows:

#1. The set gillnet fisheries in all areas of Cook Inlet historically did not move from site to site. Movement of setnetters in-season is a relatively recent occurrence. The movement tends to follow fish migration and timing from Lower Cook Inlet to the Northern District. The area registration regulations will stabilize the fishery, minimize gear conflict at certain historical fishing sites and will allow management decisions to be made based on more stable participation and reflect the historic prosecution of the fishery.

#2. The setnet fisheries in all areas of Cook Inlet are beneficial to the setnetters who use them and to the economy of the area. The board did not find the characteristics of the setnetters in any area of Cook Inlet to be significantly different from any others. The exclusive registration area regulation will not effect the economic value of the fisheries or the character of users.

#3. None of the setnet areas is more important than others to providing residents opportunity for personal consumption. The registration areas will not affect this opportunity, especially with personal use and sport fishing opportunities available in Cook Inlet.

#4. Alternative fisheries have been available to all setnetters equally in that they all have had the choice to stay in one district or to move to others. Those setnetters who have recently moved from site to site have availed themselves of more alternative resources than those who have used only one area during a season. The registration area regulation will not prevent setnetters from accessing alternative resources within the registration area they choose in any particular year. It will also have no affect on any other commercial gear type.

#5. All setnet fisheries in Cook Inlet have equal importance to the economy of the state. The board's action is not expected to have any negative affect on the economic value of the fisheries.

#6. The ability to fish more than one area in a season gives a competitive advantage to those setnetter who move, and against those who historically do not move in-season. The board's action should stabilize the fishery and equalize the advantage throughout the fishery.

#7. The board's action will have no affect on recreational opportunities.

V. BOUNDARIES OF EXCLUSIVE REGISTRATION DISTRICTS (attached)

VI. REGULATION (attached)



Tom Elias, Chairman
Alaska Board of Fisheries

Approved: Anchorage, Alaska - February 9, 1993
Vote: 6-0-1 absent