

MEMO

To: Alaska State Legislature
Joint Cook Inlet Salmon Task Force

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Subject: Testimony, Salmon Management

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I am a retired Biologist from the Alaska Department of Fish & Game, past chairman of the Mat-Su advisory committee, a permanent resident of the Mat-Su valley for twenty plus years, and an avid outdoors man who spends several weeks each year boating our local rivers. I been extensively involved in salmon management issues in Cook Inlet since 1990. I believe I have a reasonably good understanding of the salmon data and the management problems. I'm not going to rehash the sad state of affairs of our northern Cook Inlet salmon stocks, instead I want to focus on why we have this problem and how it can be resolved.

First, though I want to address this issue that the Department of Fish & Game raises about the possibility of over escapement of northern bound sockeye. Do not be led astray by this assertion! The Department points out that they counted more salmon at some of their new weir sites that they counted at their long term sonar site, and then they make the conclusion that their sonar site must be under-counting all these years. It is total erroneous to make any comparison between the these two sets of data. If the Department had a weir at these locations twenty years ago, they would have counted many more fish, and now they would have a weir trend-count (similar to the sonar count) showing a population in a precipitous decline, especially in the past decade. The Department's new weir data are an easy scape-goat tool to interject an "uncertainly factor" about the status of northern sockeye stocks, implying that nothing needs to be done. This assertion gets the Department off the hook. Rest assured sockeye, chum, and some coho stocks in northern Cook Inlet are in tough shape, and their decline is supported by many other kinds of data. Management practices must be implemented soon to prevent a population collapse that will be difficult if not impossible to reverse.

So what needs to be done? What the legislature needs to address, involves changing the emphasis on how salmon are managed in Cook Inlet. Right now, the highest priority goes to that species and that population with the greatest economic impact: e.g. Kenai sockeye at the expense of all the other salmon populations and species of salmon in Cook Inlet. Presently, the Department (and Board of Fish) can let all salmon populations decline to very low numbers, so long as they don't go completely extinct. That's what's been happening for the past 25 years, and its coming to roost now. Think about it! If there were several million cohos, and chums returning to Cook Inlet (which there were at one time), its acceptable policy to bring all these populations to the brink of extinction, so long as there are a few fish left for breeding. No university, teaching fisheries management today, would define this practice as anything close to "sustainable", but that's the our current policy in Cook Inlet. It's justified because supposedly the harvest of Kenai sockeye by the commercial fleet has been determined to be the highest economic use.

That logic, itself, is patently false! If more fish were returned to all the rivers in Cook Inlet, it would provide an economic return several-fold, and it would involve many thousands of people, rather than a few hundred commercial fishermen. However, the Board of Fish is unlikely to change Cook Inlet policy on their own (as recently demonstrated at the last board meeting). They do not have the political will or the political muscle. It's clear to many of us now, that the legislature is going to have to pass new legislation that mandates that all populations of salmon in Cook Inlet (and other important mix-stocked fisheries) will be managed for maximum sustained yield on an equal basis with other mixed stocks, and no salmon population will be allow to decline or be depleted to low numbers at the expense of another. Enacting such a mandate will not be easy, but if Alaska is going to continue to boast about their effective salmon management practices in this state, then it is long past time to move in a new progressive direction. Antiquated management practices, now so prevalent in Northern Cook Inlet, should no longer be tolerated. Right now, our present Cook Inlet policy does not meet our constitutional mandates to manage all species for sustained yield.

If something is not done by this legislature, I predict the courts will soon be issuing injunctions that could throw Cook Inlet salmon management into complete chaos. Time to correct past mistakes is running out, you need to act soon.