

Senate Resource Comm. Testimony on UCI Salmon Fisheries
Mar. 24, 2014

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before you today. My name is Dwight Kramer and I am Chairman of Kenai Area Fisherman's Coalition.

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 10 past ADF&G or USF&W fisheries biologists on our Board of Directors or in our membership.

We advocate for science based fisheries management and sustained resource stability by providing direct input to agencies regarding fisheries management and habitat issues. We have no commercial interests.

UCI King Salmon Stocks

During the early part of the 1900s our UCI King stocks were devastated by over-fishing in the poorly regulated commercial sector. It took about 20 years or so to a recovery of these stocks so they could produce harvestable numbers once again. During this recovery there were years of commercial closures and the sport fishery, as we know it, had not developed yet. The fish enjoyed virtually natural river systems to reproduce and recover. There was little development, hardly any sport fishing effort and no pike.

Now we find ourselves in another period of low King salmon abundance partly because of ocean phenomena that we don't fully understand and partly because of human effects. We now have trawlers operating in the high seas that take countless thousands of Kings as by-catch, vast developments and roadways along and crossing our streams, hydrocarbon contamination from boat engines, bank erosion and turbidity issues from boat wakes, invasive species (pike) in many of our lakes and waterways and of course a growing public demand for fishing opportunities.

One of the causes of this recent collapse has to be shouldered by a mismanaged in-river sport and guided sport fishery. Never before in their history had our King salmon been fished for size selectivity and pursued on their spawning grounds for trophy selection. 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 produce fewer females than in more productive times.

Please Note: These are all symptoms that we are currently seeing in our Kenai and UCI stocks.

The point being is that we should expect any recovery of these stocks to take much longer than at any other time in history because of the new human effects and a growing demand to want to fish on them as soon as there are any harvestable amounts to satisfy socio-economic interests.

Now, more than any other time in recent years, is when we have to adopt more conservation oriented approaches to how we manage our King salmon fisheries so that we can institute an in-river model that will stand the test of time and give us the best opportunity at achieving healthy and sustainable stocks for future generations to enjoy.

We have to stop taking our biggest and best breeders out of our systems and we have to have more spawning protections on some of our most productive spawning and staging grounds. We can start by protecting our biggest fish with meaningful, season long slot limits individually appropriate for all of our rivers. Taxidermists have molds for all sizes and shapes of Kings so it's no longer necessary to kill a large King to get a mount made.

In the case of our current King salmon situation we have to remember that scientists tell us, "When salmon runs are at risk, conservation must be given a priority"

Habitat Issues

Healthy salmon stocks rely on good habitat in our rivers, streams and lakes. We currently have many habitat issues that stand in our way of

rebuilding declining stocks and maintaining healthy ones. Because of socio-economic issues related to the powerful guided sport fish lobby and tourism, both municipalities and state agencies are reluctant to support necessary listings of impaired water bodies as identified by the clean water act and the more obvious crippling impacts of invasive species (pike) on juvenile salmon production.

In the Matsu for instance, ten years ago we had 11 sockeye producing lakes in the Susitna drainage. Then a few years ago we were down to seven and now we are down to four and two of the four have failed to meet their escapement levels in the last two years. Pike and stream blockage by beaver dams are the main two reasons. We have hydrocarbon and turbidity violations associated with powerboat use in the Little Susitna that is worse than the Kenai ever was but no Category 5 impaired water-body listing to date. In Big lake we have quit trying to enhance Sockeye production because the juvenile survival rates were so poor because of pollution factors associated with hydrocarbon exceedances and chemical pollution associated with runoff of lawn care products (fertilizer, weed killers, etc.) and sewage issues.

In the Kenai we have different issues associated with increased use and a shift in use patterns that is not being addressed. One would think that with reduced King salmon fishing opportunities things would be better but that is not the case. We have seen a huge increase in July powerboat traffic associated with personal use fishermen launching upriver to avoid the congestion of the lower river launches and parking. In 2013, for instance, the days that we exceeded turbidity standards on the lower river coincided with the busiest days in the PU fishery. This should be a growing concern to the resource for both bank erosion and juvenile salmon survival.

Another issue of concern is the rapid growth in the in-river sockeye sport fishery. Both the guide industry and private sector have transferred efforts away from the King fishery to the more productive Sockeye fishery. This doesn't come without problems though as this is mostly a bank oriented fishery and we are witnessing new areas of bank degradation in the riparian areas associated with riverbank crowding. The sad part is that nobody from the various agencies currently have available staff to assess these damages and make appropriate bank closures. This is an area where recent budget cuts and personnel

vacancies have reduced our effectiveness in habitat protection where our vigilance now should be more rather than less.

So overall, if we don't want to end up like the Pacific Northwest and have to spend billions of dollars on reclamation projects, hatcheries and enhancement to rebuild the salmon stocks we failed to protect. We need to acknowledge our habitat problems and deal with them now rather than later. Everyone should want clean water and healthy habitat. To stand in the way this endeavor is neither prudent of good fishery management and should not be tolerated by anyone associated with legislative oversight.

Board of Fisheries

Given the complexities of our fisheries and the current allocation issues related to declining stock issues throughout most of Alaska, it has become apparent to many that our current BOF process does not possess the technical knowledge and sometimes internal integrity to accomplish decisions based on science and available technical data.

The recent Upper Cook Inlet meeting was a prime example. A majority of the board had a preconceived agenda on how they were going to deal with the King salmon declines throughout Upper Cook Inlet and Sockeye numbers in the Susitna. That conclusion was to find a way to transfer allocations from the commercial sector to the in-river users and that they did. There was little regards for in-river conservation measures on how these fish would be protected so that we could advance a production model that would actually help us start to recover these stocks.

We believe that the benefits of this methodology will be marginal without meaningful changes in how we regulate in-river fishing methods. There was no serious considerations for how we can protect prominent spawning areas or most of the largest age class fish of our most valuable breeding component.

The current BOF process is swayed to easily by the most prominent and powerful groups and often give into political pressure, innuendo and fabricated statements rather than scientific information.

It is time to consider a professional Board of Fisheries. With billions of dollars at stake annually involved in this decision making body we have evolved past the time when a lay board is adequate to meet the demands of our modern day fishery issues. With everything from foreign enhancement and competition, high seas mortality, global warming, evolving habitat issues, population increases and overall growing demand we have to have a panel of experts from various areas of fisheries expertise that can better understand the volumes data and research that is presented for evaluation in the decision making process. For instance, this last 2014 UCI meeting produced thousands of pages of data, research reports, proposals, public comment, and meeting record comments. During the meeting it became painfully obvious that the board members had not had time to adequately familiarize themselves with much of this information.

What can a legislative body like this do to help:

We believe there are two important things the legislature could do that would help change the course of Upper Cook Inlet salmon production and allocative management;

- 1) Initiate legislation to move toward a professional Board of Fisheries. We envision this body to be made up of paid positions selected for their scientific or socio-economic expertise in the area of fisheries management and research. We would also suggest that they would have a dedicated research staff solely for the purpose of helping them coalesce and present necessary data for the regulatory area under consideration at the time.**

Members of this board would be selected by the governor and confirmed by the legislature, much as it is now. Members of this board would be selected for their knowledge of fishery issues without regards to any allocative or area representation.

The Board meetings would still invite public participation in regulatory proposals submissions and public testimony.

We're not sure exactly what for this body should actually look like but these are our suggestions. There are probably a variety of

state fishery boards out there that could provide a workable outline for this concept.

- 2) We believe it is imperative that the legislature support a comprehensive independent research project of our UCI salmon stocks and habitat issues as they relate to the recovery and sustainability of these valuable resources. We would like to see this accomplished along the same lines as the recently published, “Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim Chinook Salmon Research Action Plan”, which involved some of the most respected fishery scientists in the nation. This document laid out various hypothesis for what precipitated the declines, issues that needed attention and recommendations for research projects that could be beneficial in the recovery and long-term sustainability of the stocks.**

The timing is perfect for pursuing this type of effort as there appears to be some funding that might be available through the direction of the recently approved National Marine Fisheries Service’s 2012 salmon fisheries disaster relief program. It appears that the State of Alaska is going to be instrumental in deciding how this 20.8 million dollars is going to be divided up and dispersed within Alaska.

So to recap our testimony:

We believe we need to put more emphases on in-river King salmon production by installing regulatory sport fishing methods that protect our largest age class breeding stocks and set aside some protective zones recognized as important spawning and staging areas.

We need to acknowledge and mitigate habitat deficiencies that could cause undesirable effects on the recovery and sustainability of our fishery resources.

We need to move forward on changing to a professional Board of Fisheries to meet our modern day complexities and future demands on our fishery resources.

We need a complete and thorough independent review of our UCI salmon stocks, habitat issues and fisheries management practices.

I once again thank you for the opportunity to present testimony before you today and would be happy to answer any questions you might have.