



Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee
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June 7, 2018

Honourable Dominic LeBlanc
Minister of Fisheries, Oceans and Canadian Coast Guard
200 Kent Street
Station 15N100
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0E6

Dear Minister LeBlanc:

**Re: 2018 YUKON RIVER SALMON MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ALLOCATION
RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee (YSSC) is established and mandated under Yukon First Nation Final Agreements (YFNFA), which are entrenched in the Constitution of Canada, as “the main instrument of Salmon management in the Yukon.”

Section 16.7.17.12 of the YFNFA instructs that, after Consultation with affected Yukon First Nations, the YSSC **shall** make recommendations to the Minister on allocation, in amount and by area, of Salmon to users. In addition to that, the YSSC may make recommendations to the Minister on the need for, and a position on, inter-jurisdiction agreements affecting the use of Yukon salmon resources and on the content and timing of Salmon Harvesting and management plans.

As background to undertaking this review of run projections and recommendations on allocation of Canadian-origin Yukon River Chinook salmon it is important to recognize that there is a continuing need for conservation and precautionary management of this stock. Runs continue to be relatively low (~50% of historical) and productivity (the ratio of spawners to returning adults) has been low for nearly a decade as well declines in quality of escapement (reductions in size, age and proportion of females) has resulted in reduced fecundity and eggs in the gravel.

It is also important to acknowledge greatly improved management efforts and successes in recent years especially in the U.S. but also in Canada since 2014. It includes the sacrifices of fishers on both sides of the border and the continued leadership of Yukon First Nations during this period. This has provided for some of the highest Chinook spawning escapements on record during the last 4 years in spite of very low runs. But there is also evidence of some “conservation fatigue” in U.S. communities along the Yukon River and relaxation of some management requirements and restrictions in the U.S. for the 2018 season (e.g. the removal of 1st pulse protection in regulation). This appears to be based on the perception that the sacrifices in recent years have paid off and runs have improved so it now it is time to get back to fishing as in the past. All this points to the need for longer term conservation strategies and approaches in coordinating management and harvesting between both countries and continued Canadian lobbying efforts with the U.S. at all levels to allow for a sustained recovery of the stock.

Mainstem Yukon River - Chinook Salmon:

The 2018 pre-season forecast jointly developed by Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) identifies the return of Canadian-origin Chinook salmon to be between 71,000 and 103,000. This is considered a weak run size and well below the long-term historical average of 150,000.

In April 2018, the International Yukon River Panel (established pursuant to the *Pacific Salmon Treaty - Yukon River Salmon Agreement*) re-confirmed the Interim Management Escapement Goal (IMEG) at 42,500 to 55,000. The Yukon River Panel also recommended the Parties adopt a conservative approach to management of Chinook salmon during the 2018 season in response to the sustained decline of this stock over the past several decades. Furthermore, the Panel recommended to the use of in-season run estimates (at 50% passage point) as a precautionary measure to inform in-season management.

For the past three years, Canada has used the midpoint of the spawning escapement goal range (i.e. 48,750) as a domestic management target and has promoted the use of this target bilaterally through the Yukon River Panel processes.

Recommendation #1: *Given the high level of uncertainty associated with the range of preseason run projections (71,000-103,000 Chinook), corresponding Canadian harvest shares (5,100-12,500 Chinook) and other factors as outlined above, YSSC recommends a precautionary approach to preseason management planning. bThis will mean assuming that the run will return at the lower end of the preseason projection (i.e. 71,000, with a Canadian harvest share of 5,100 Chinook) and will not allow for a full FN subsistence fishery of 8,000 Chinook. There should be no preseason allocation to other fisheries until in-season information indicates adequate run sizes and Canadian harvest shares that would allow for this.*

Commercial fishery	Closed
Domestic fishery	Closed
Public Angling fishery	Retention varied to 0
First Nation subsistence fishery	Allocation available (limited initial effort) Establish voluntary harvest restriction target (e.g. 75% of normal harvest). Each First Nation establishes strategies to achieve target.

Allocation to other fisheries should be considered when spawning escapement goals are achieved (47,750 - 55,000) and there is an unrestricted (numbers of fish) First Nation subsistence fishery.

This recommendation has taken into consideration the following Chinook Salmon Decision Matrix:

Below Spawning Escapement Range (<42,500)

- No allocation available / all fisheries closed

Within Spawning Escapement Range (42,500-55,000)

42,500-48,750

- Harvest for First Nations recommended to be less than 10% of historical catch levels.
- 48,750-55,000
- Harvest for First Nations recommended to be 10% to 90% of historical catch levels.

Consideration of opportunities for public angling and limited retention based on in-season run projections, First Nation harvest management and needs and international harvest sharing provisions.

Above Spawning Escapement Range (>55,000)

- Full unrestricted First Nation subsistence fishery,
- Allowable catch for public angling, domestic and commercial fisheries will be determined based on run abundance and international harvest sharing provisions and long-term conservation objectives.

In addition to the matrix the following in-season fishery management principles were also considered by the YSSC in arriving at the 2018 allocation recommendation:

1. Enabling a sufficient number of Chinook salmon to reach their spawning grounds in Canada as required under the Yukon River Salmon Agreement to be maintained as a top priority.
2. In-season information on the quality of escapement (specifically sex ratio of returning salmon) should be considered in advance of making in-season fishery management decisions. Currently this metric is identified as a long-term historical ratio of males to females at approximately 55% males to 45% females.
3. A precautionary approach should be adopted given the uncertainty with in-season assessment information, concerns over continued low productivity due to low recruitment and/or survival rates) and the long-term decline and continued low run abundance (approximately 50 % of historical levels) of Canadian-origin Chinook stocks observed since the late 1990s. Fishery management decisions should be based on the best available information from downstream assessment sites in Alaska (i.e. Pilot and Eagle sonar monitoring programs) and longer-term conservation and stock recovery objectives.
4. Given the long-term low productivity, including those years when spawning escapement objectives were not achieved, the development of a longer term Canadian management strategy for this stock is needed. A number of First Nation Governments have already incorporated long-term objectives into local management approaches.
5. Where possible, harvest of Chinook salmon should be directed at smaller (younger) fish most of which will be males. This can be achieved through the use of smaller-mesh gill nets (i.e. 6" or less) and the selective release of larger (older) fish and females that are in good condition.

In light of the low predicted run size for 2018, ongoing period of poor productivity, and failure to meet spawning escapement targets in some recent years, the YSSC recommends the First Nation fishery be initiated conservatively. This precautionary approach is intended to provide protection for migrating Chinook salmon early in the season until a robust estimate of the number and quality of the returns can be made. This approach is consistent with allocation practices over the past several years and voluntary conservation measures and harvest restrictions undertaken by many First Nations. As confidence in-season abundance improves, fishery management actions would proceed according to the management matrix and principles provided above.

Recommendation #2: *That consideration be given to limited public angling fishing openings and opportunities for Chinook salmon retention if in-season data indicates that spawning escapement objectives will be met and First Nations subsistence fisheries will not be limited.*

The YSSC is concerned that after many years of angling closures or non-retention restrictions that the Yukon public is becoming disconnected from salmon and that broad public interest and support for salmon management and habitat protection is eroding. Such limited public angling fisheries should consider the need for angler education, including: promoting the need to avoid fishing over actively spawning Chinook salmon; releasing larger female salmon; and limiting the amount of live release angling by harvesting a smaller male salmon and then ceasing fishing.

Mainstem Yukon River - Fall Chum Salmon

The 2018 pre-season forecast (jointly developed by DFO and ADF&G) identifies the return of Canadian-origin fall chum salmon to be between 400,000 and 450,000. This is considered to be a strong run size and well above the long-term historical average.

In April 2018, the International Yukon River Panel reconfirmed the Interim Management Escapement Goal (IMEG) at 70,000 to 104,000.

Recommendation #3: *That the utilization of fall Chum by all fisheries be encouraged and facilitated to the extent possible in recognition of the prediction that the fall Chum run will be very strong and as a potential alternative to Chinook salmon.*

Porcupine River - Fall Chum Salmon

The pre-season forecast for the Fishing Branch River (Porcupine Drainage) fall Chum salmon run of between 64,000 to 72,000, is considered to be a relatively weak run. The spawning escapement target range is 22,000 to 49,000. Over the last decade, the average Vuntut Gwitchin harvest has been approximately 3,000 fall Chum salmon. The Basic Needs Allocation identified in the *Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement* is 6,000 fall Chum salmon. Though the escapement goal was met in 2017, it was not achieved in several prior years. Returns well below the spawning escapement goals cause continued concern about the sustainability of the resource and security of access to Chum salmon for Vuntut Gwitchin subsistence fishery.

Recommendation #4: *Given the pre-season forecast for a weak return, the following fishery licensing actions be implemented in advance of the arrival of Chum salmon into Canadian waters: allocation available for the Vuntut Gwitchin subsistence fishery.*

In light of some very low run sizes and failure to meet conservation targets in recent years, the YSSC recommends the Vuntut Gwitchin fishery be initiated conservatively. This approach is intended to provide an opportunity for a modest subsistence harvest during the early part of the run until such time as a more robust in-season estimate may be derived from information collected through the Porcupine Chum salmon sonar assessment program. As confidence in in-season abundance improves, fishery management actions would proceed in accordance with abundance.

Porcupine River – Chinook Salmon

There are no established border passage or spawning escapement objectives for Porcupine River Chinook. Information limitations preclude the development of a formal forecast or outlook for Chinook salmon returning to the Porcupine River in Canada. In the absence of this information, the general outlook for

Porcupine Chinook salmon will be based on an extension of the mainstem Yukon River Chinook salmon outlook (i.e. about 5% of the mainstem outlook or a weak run with abundance similar in size to the returns over the past several years based on results of the Porcupine River Sonar.). Based on this, the YSSC understands that a total run size of **3,000-5,000** Chinook salmon is anticipated to return to the Porcupine River in 2018. Over the past 10 years the average Vuntut Gwitchin annual harvest has been approximately 275 Chinook salmon while the Basic Needs Allocation identified in the *Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement* is 750 Chinook salmon.

Recommendation #6: *Given the pre-season forecast, the YSSC recommends the management approach for Chinook salmon in the Porcupine River at the beginning of the season be as follows: allocation available for the Vuntut Gwitchin subsistence fishery*

In light of the low run sizes across the entire Yukon River drainage, the YSSC further recommends the Vuntut Gwitchin fishery be initiated in a conservative manner with harvest of Chinook salmon levels similar to those in recent years. This approach is intended to provide an opportunity for subsistence fishing during the early part of the run until such time as a more robust in-season estimate may be derived from information collected through the Porcupine River Chinook salmon sonar. As confidence in in-season abundance improves, fishery management actions should proceed in accordance with abundance and the Vuntut Gwitchin Salmon Management Plan.

Porcupine River – Coho Salmon

Currently, information limitations preclude the development of a formal forecast or outlook for Coho salmon returning to the Porcupine River in Canada. In the absence of stock specific information, the general outlook for Porcupine River Coho salmon is based on the drainage-wide outlook which projects an average return in 2018. The Basic Needs Allocation identified in the *Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation Final Agreement* is 900 Coho salmon.

Recommendation #7: *That the management approach for Coho salmon in the Porcupine River for the 2018 season be as follows: allocation available for the Vuntut Gwitchin subsistence fishery.*

Public Engagement

The development of these recommendations has been an iterative process that took place throughout the past year. It involved extensive public meetings, committee meetings, presentations, and consultations, and included written, email and online correspondence. In addition, the YSSC, with technical support from DFO, met with the following First Nation Governments, communities and Renewable Resources Councils in advance of providing the 2018 recommendations:

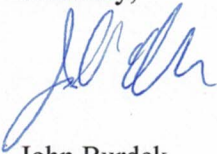
- Annual Bi-Lateral DFO / Yukon First Nations Fisheries Meeting (with representatives present from Vuntut Gwitchin, Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, Nacho Nyäk Dun, Selkirk First Nation, Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation, Ta'an Kwäch'än Council, Kwanlin Dun First Nation, White River First Nation and Teslin Tlingit Council)
- Teslin Tlingit Council/Natural Resources Department
- Northern Tutchone May Gathering (Pelly Crossing; includes Government representatives and citizens from Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation, First Nation of Nacho Nyak Dun and Selkirk First Nation)
- Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in Lands/Natural Resources Department
- Dawson Commercial Fishers
- Little Salmon/Carmacks First Nation Lands/Natural Resources Department

- Vuntut Gwitchin Government
- Old Crow Community
- Nacho Nyak Dun Lands/Natural Resources Department
- Yukon River Panel

The YSSC will continue to engage in Yukon River salmon management during the 2018 season and commits to working with DFO, Yukon First Nations Governments and salmon stakeholders to achieve conservation objectives.

We look forward to receiving your response to our recommendations, ideally in advance of the arrival of salmon into the Canadian portion of the Yukon River watershed (anticipated to occur on or before July 1).

Sincerely,



John Burdek
Second Vice-Chair

Cc. Steve Gotch – Director, Yukon Transboundary Rivers Area, DFO
Nathan Millar – Manager, Treaties and Fisheries (Yukon River) DFO