



Salmon swim through the Whitehorse fish ladder 2016. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has allowed Alaskan fishermen to sell Chinook salmon incidentally caught during commercial openings for chum salmon. It's the first time since 2017 that incidentally-caught Chinook has been for sale. (Joel Krahn/Yukon News file)

# Alaska allows sale of Chinook incidentally caught during commercial chum salmon fishing

Strong run numbers at the Pilot sonar meant a lifting of restrictions, an ADFG biologist said

JACKIE HONG / Jul. 12, 2019 11:30 a.m. / LOCAL NEWS / NEWS

Alaskan fishermen were allowed to sell Chinook salmon incidentally caught during the commercial fishing period for chum, the Alaska Department of Fish

and Game (ADFG) announced July 9.

It's the first time since 2017 that Alaskan fishermen were allowed to sell incidentally-caught Chinook, and the first time since 2010 that Chinook incidentally caught during the summer season will be available for sale (the fish sold in 2017 were from the fall run).

The chum commercial fishing period took place from July 9 to 11.

The decision was prompted by the strong numbers being recorded at the Pilot Station sonar located near the mouth of the Yukon River, Holly Carroll, ADFG's summer-season area management biologist, told the *News* July 11.

The Pilot sonar has counted more than 200,000 fish so far, with about 99 per cent of the run now in the river. The total number is expected to hit the upper end of the pre-season forecast of a 168,000 to 241,000-fish run (69,000 to 99,000 of those were forecasted to be of Canadian origin; historical runs had as many as 150,000 Canadian-origin fish).

That means the run is likely hit its escapement goal of 42,500 to 55,000 Canadian-origin fish, Carroll said, which is ADFG's first priority. With that taken care of, the department then turned its attention to harvest, determining there were enough fish to allow for unrestricted subsistence harvest as well as the sale of incidentally-caught Chinook.

Alaskans will also be allowed to use nets with a maximum of 7.5-inch mesh while subsistence-fishing for chinook. The Yukon River Panel, in the pre-season, had recommended the use of 6-inch mesh, but Carroll said the restriction was unnecessary with the number of fish available.

Carroll also emphasized that the commercial fishermen on the Yukon River "are all local, Native fishermen," the majority of whom live in communities with few other economic opportunities and are dependent on salmon for both food and income.

“The revenue (fishermen) get from commercial fishing in the lower river almost a hundred per cent ties back into their other subsistence activities, like berry-picking and hunting in the fall,” she said.

“They’ll use all this money to buy gas or upgrade their boats or to buy nets for their subsistence activities, so while it sounds like some sort of, you know, high money-making thing, it’s not ... It’s the only economic benefit in this region. There’s not a lot of full-time jobs on the delta.”

In years where the sale of incidentally-caught Chinook is not allowed, fishermen count their catches towards their subsistence harvest.

Commercial fishing targeting chinook remains prohibited on both sides of the border. This is the 12th consecutive year the ban has remained in place.

On the Yukon side of the river, only Yukon First Nations have been allocated a harvest this year, as has been the case for several years now.

Jesse Trerice, Fisheries and Oceans Canada’s assistant fishery manager for the Yukon River, did not respond to a request for comment. However, Yukon Salmon Sub-Committee executive director Elizabeth MacDonald said July 10 that, unless the sonar at Eagle near the Alaska-Yukon border shows far higher-than-expected numbers, she doesn’t expect the Canadian management strategy or harvest rules to change this season.

Biologically, there’s little concern over Alaska allowing the sale of incidentally-caught Chinook, MacDonald said — the fish, whether reported as subsistence or commercial, are being removed from the run either way and not making it to Canada.

There is, though, the question about the perception the ADFG's decision creates.

"I understand why they've done it," MacDonald said. "... It's just the perception that First Nations people (in the Yukon) are going to be reducing their harvests on this side, trying to get more salmon to the spawning grounds and a lot of that is voluntarily done, which shows a great stewardship ethic, and then at the same time you have on the Alaskan side people selling salmon."

She added that the sub-committee had been "hoping everyone would be using the six-inch" mesh maximum, as that size mostly snags smaller male fish, who are less crucial to the spawning process, while allowing larger females through.

There's some concern with the use of 7.5-inch mesh "simply because you're going to be catching more of those larger females," she said.

Neither Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in nor the Teslin Tlingit Council, which have both had voluntary moratoriums on Chinook harvesting for several years now, responded to requests for comment.

Carroll acknowledged that while Alaska's decision may be "uncomfortable" for some Yukoners, it shouldn't be coming as a surprise to anyone — the possibility of opening up the commercial sale of incidental catch is available whenever Chinook runs exceed 200,000.

"While it may be uncomfortable when there are people choosing to forgo their agreed-to harvest (in the Yukon), Alaska is providing that agreed-to harvest to Canada, and what they choose to do with their share, it's not our concern," she said.

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“And what we choose to do with our share, I hope it’s clear, we are doing based on biological certainty first and these constitutionally-mandated priority uses in the state of Alaska, and we do have a priority to provide for a healthy economy in these communities as well.”

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