

Alaskan and Yukon Fisheries Managers Co-operate to Get Yukon River Chinooks to Canada

2007 Run of Canadian Chinook Salmon Weaker than Expected

(Anchorage) - Alaskan fisheries managers are working closely with their counterparts in Canada's Yukon Territory, using state-of-the art technology and employing very conservative policies in their effort to ensure adequate returns of Yukon River Chinook salmon up the river into Canada this summer.

John Hilsinger, Director of the Commercial Fisheries Division at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), said the Chinook salmon run has been weaker than anticipated. "There aren't as many kings coming up the river as we had expected," he said. "It appears that the Canadian component of the run, in particular, is smaller." The normal guideline harvest level for Alaska's in-river commercial fishery is between 60,000 and 120,000 Chinooks. Based on pre-season projections, Hilsinger said this year's harvest level was set at 30,000 to 60,000. Biologists anticipated approximately 150,000 fish escaping past the major commercial fisheries to provide for subsistence harvests and spawning escapement upriver in Alaska and Canada.

When the first pulse of Chinook salmon entered the river from June 14 to 17, run strength appeared to be consistent with the pre-season projections. The second pulse of Chinook salmon to enter the river, however, was very weak, Hilsinger reported. "So, commercial fishing with large mesh gillnets was stopped June 26th with a harvest of 23,000 large Chinook salmon." 9,000 more Chinook salmon were caught with small mesh nets during targeted summer chum salmon fishing. About 70% of these 9,000 additional Chinook salmon were males. "Given the weakness of the run, we wanted to let as many egg-bearing females get upriver as possible," Hilsinger explained. As a result of these conservative actions, all escapement goals in Alaska have been met, while the total commercial harvest was the fifth smallest since statehood.

ADF&G managers consciously curtailed harvests in the lower river to try to meet the Canadian Border escapement goal of 33,000 to 43,000 fish as well as provide fish for Canadian harvests. However, commercial harvests occur mainly in the lower river during mid to late June, 4 to 6 weeks before the fish are counted at the Canadian border. The season total estimate based on the count at the Pilot Station sonar counted only 125,000 Chinook salmon, less than the expected 150,000. While fish are still crossing the border, Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans officials estimate that 25,000 to 30,000 fish will make it to Canada. Using two sonar counters (one on each bank) just below the U.S./Canada border near Eagle, ADF&G's estimates a larger escapement, of about 40,000 Chinook salmon. This would be within the range of the pre-season escapement goal.

Yukon River Chinook are subject to an international treaty agreement between the U.S. and Canada. The Yukon Panel of the Pacific Salmon Commission has a standing Joint Technical Committee composed of scientists from both countries. The Committee is studying enumeration techniques and trying to come up with the best possible methods for establishing escapement goals. Hilsinger said the Committee will review its findings at meetings later this year and next year. The panel is also assessing priorities for use of the Restoration and Enhancement Fund and how it might be used to answer some of these questions. "Alaskan and Canadian fisheries scientists and managers have been communicating throughout the run as have users all along the river during the weekly Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association teleconferences," Hilsinger said. "We have excellent communication and collaboration across the border and all along this huge river system. We're doing our best to try to meet those Canadian escapement goals." He said management on the Alaska side has been consistently conservative since the very poor runs in 1998-2000. "Since that time, commercial harvests have been reduced and escapements into Canada have been generally very good." Hilsinger said U.S. and Canadian biologists are looking at

the potential to estimate the number of Canada-bound Chinook in the lower river with genetic stock identification in-season to assist in management decisions.