

Yukon River Panel, Communications Committee  
**Project CC-01-16**

Yukon River In-Season Salmon Management Teleconferences  
Final Report

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*The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views the funding entity.*

**Study History:** The Yukon River is the third longest river in North America and the longest river in Alaska. Originating in northern British Columbia the Yukon River flows north through Canada's Yukon Territory and west, through interior Alaska to the Bering Sea coast. There are over 42 rural communities along the Yukon River in Alaska and about 10 communities in the Canadian headwaters that rely on the river's salmon resources. These primarily native communities need access to consistent and updated information on fisheries management and assessment projects carried out by state and federal fisheries agencies. Additionally, fisheries managers benefit from talking directly with fishermen along the full length of this remote river. They share information about water levels, fishing conditions, harvest goals, fish quality and other details that help managers with management decision making on a weekly basis. Teleconference calls during the salmon season were initiated by the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) as a practical and useful method for discussing the complexities of salmon management and for gaining immediate real-time information from fishers along the length of the Yukon River. The goal of the In-season Salmon Management Teleconferences (the teleconferences) program is to improve public awareness and foster community partnerships and relations focused on the conservative management of Canadian origin Yukon River Chinook and fall chum salmon.

**Abstract:** The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association hosted weekly in-season teleconference calls during the 2016 Yukon River salmon fishery season, from the first week of June through August. The teleconference calls, held every Tuesday at 1 p.m. Alaska time, 2 p.m. Pacific Standard time-zone, are a means to exchange information on run timing, salmon abundance, and escapement data as the runs progress. Fisheries management strategies were discussed and an open forum for discussion among fishermen and fisheries managers was facilitated to enable drainage-wide communication across a large and remote geographic area. Teleconferences lasted between 1-2 hours and were technically hosted through General Communications Inc. (GCI) of Alaska. Summaries of each call were written by YRDFA staff from notes taken during the call and posted to the YRDFA website with a corresponding announcement and link from our Face Book page. The Yukon River Panel and the Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Subsistence Management fund the Yukon River teleconferences.

**Key Words:** Alaska, Canada, Chinook, chum, commercial fisheries, fisheries management, inseason management, salmon, subsistence harvest, teleconference, Yukon River, Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Since its inception in 1994, the In-season Salmon Management Teleconference program has provided a practical and useful method for fishermen, commercial processors, fisheries managers and researchers, and other stakeholders in Yukon River salmon fisheries to discuss the complexities of salmon management and to gain immediate real-time information across the 2,000-mile expanse of the Yukon River and its tributaries. Facilitated by the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFFA), these teleconferences have enabled local fisheries users to provide valuable insight to fisheries managers on in-season salmon subsistence needs, river conditions, fish quality and other local and traditional ecological knowledge of salmon fisheries. The State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) provide weekly information to fishermen and other community members about current research and monitoring tools they operate. The callers then ask questions and an open discussion takes place to build public awareness and foster community partnerships in an effort to conservatively manage Canadian origin Chinook salmon runs while at the same time appropriately managing other stocks along the Yukon River.

## **STUDY AREA**

The Yukon River drainage in Alaska and Yukon Territory, Canada.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this program are to:

- 1) Promote the in-season salmon management calls pre-season;
- 2) Coordinate and facilitate the in-season salmon management calls; and
- 3) Summarize calls on a weekly basis and post on the YRDFFA website.

## **METHODS Pre-Season**

To organize and carry out weekly teleconference calls during the 2016 summer and fall fishing season, YRDFFA analyzed the 2015 teleconferences to see what worked well and what did not. YRDFFA consulted managers from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). All parties agreed that efforts to curtail areas of discussion that were beyond the jurisdiction and influence of fresh water fisheries managers were showing success. Managers shared that the calls seem to go a bit long for their busy schedules but YRDFFA explained that it was crucial that people on the calls feel heard and are not cut off. Other areas related to the calls such as the phone number, duration of calls, agenda items and meeting formats would remain the same.

The calls have been operational for over 12 years and there are many Yukon River people, Tribes, First Nations, state and federal agencies and non-governmental organizations that are well aware of and participate in the calls. A flyer was sent out to all Yukon River Tribal and city councils in 2016 with the specific teleconference information including time of the call, call in number, agenda items and teleconference reporting format.

### **In-Season**

From June 7, 2016 through August 30, 2016, 13 teleconference calls were hosted. YRDFA director Wayne Jenkins facilitated most of the in-season salmon management teleconferences every Tuesday at 1 p.m. Alaska time and 2 p.m. Each call lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, depending on the level of participation and amount of discussion. A brief summary of each call was written and posted to the YRDFA website with an announcement and link from YRDFA's Face Book page. Interest and participation fluctuate depending on when the Chinook are running and whether fishing is active in a village or region.

### **Post-Season**

YRDFA reported on this project as requested at various meetings such as the Yukon River Panel meetings during Communications Committee presentations and also in written reports to the Office of Subsistence Management, Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program, and in-person or phone reports at Regional Advisory Council meetings who also fund the teleconferences.

Post season calls to managers and regular callers from all Yukon River Fishing Districts for evaluating the calls and taking recommendations for improvement was managed by YRDFA staff. Please see the attached summary of those evaluation calls.

## **RESULTS**

In 2016, YRDFA held 13 in-season salmon management teleconferences on Tuesdays, starting the first week of June and continuing through August. The calls followed an agenda each week that opened with subsistence and river condition reports from community-fishers along the entire length of the Yukon River followed by reports from state and federal fisheries managers on their fishery assessments and management strategies. Once the Chinook run was near the Canadian border, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in Canada added their reports and the Yukon fishing communities in the Canadian headwaters contributed.

The teleconferences included members of the public that may have been calling in for the first time, as well as regulars that have been participating for years. These participants play a myriad of roles in their communities as local fishermen, Tribal council members, City council members, Elders, YRDFA board members, Yukon River Panel members, as well as state and federal regional advisory council members. There were harvest surveyors in 10 Yukon River villages that were hired by YRDFA under a grant from the Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program. Surveyors report in a more structured format on the number of fishing households they spoke with each week during the Chinook salmon fishing season and what they learned from the

fishing households. No general roll call is taken, though media and legislative representatives/staff are requested to identify themselves, so a true recount of participants is not possible but we know from previous years that many state and federal agencies as well as state legislative offices and river centric media participate in order to listen and learn about the status of the Yukon River salmon runs, in-season. Key agency managers responsible for Yukon River fisheries management announced themselves as they gave their reports or if they were asked to address a specific question that was in their area of specialty.

The important issues addressed this season during the teleconferences included the low Yukon River Chinook salmon runs and the conservative management strategies used in-season to ensure enough Canadian-bound Chinook salmon would make it to the spawning grounds in Canada for meeting agreed upon escapement goals. In 2016, in-river Chinook salmon fisheries were managed conservatively and this was a major discussion point each week; how the run was coming in and when pulse closures would take place and what gear restrictions were in place. The purpose of the in-season salmon management calls is to discuss *in-river* fisheries management. Over the years, other issues such as the Bering Sea bycatch and mining and hydro-dams in Yukon Territory, which are outside of the management responsibilities and control of ADFG and USFWS managers, is repeatedly mentioned. At the start of each call we remind the participants of the focus of the calls and sources of information and websites where they can find information about these concerns. This has reduced time spent on important but extraneous issues for these calls.

Summaries for each teleconference provided highlights on fishers' reports, questions, and comments, along with key management updates. These summaries were shared with teleconference participants and other interested parties through email and posted on the YR DFA website.

YR DFA staff also managed a post teleconference evaluation by calling key participants and key managers on the calls with a series of questions designed for improving our service to both parties.

## **Measure of Success**

The project objectives were met. YR DFA carried out all the in-season salmon management teleconferences to give fisheries managers and local fishing communities the opportunity to learn from each other and to share information about fishing conditions on the Yukon River. A range of participants, from first time callers to frequent participants conversed, listened and learned about Yukon River fisheries that enabled them to better participate in winter meetings and other forums. This was done through consistent conversations that took place between fishers and managers on the status of the Chinook salmon run during the 2016 season and a repeated effort to discuss the need for conservation with the public while striving to meet subsistence and commercial goals.

Progress towards completion of the grant goals are measured in the number of calls that take place, the topics covered during the calls and the relative nature in which the public cooperated

with the need for conservative management of Chinook salmon while at the same time trying to allow for the harvest of more abundant species.

***The Numbers***

We have tracked numbers of participants over time and it has remained relatively consistent. For raw numbers see the chart below. This year participant numbers did not follow the usual pattern of starting low but began high, which we believe was driven by expectations of early Chinook returns after a very mild winter. Participant numbers remained high for six weeks as the Chinook and summer chum runs got underway and fish moved upstream. By week 8, call interest had dropped but continued at a moderate to low level until the end of the teleconference period which is usually well into the fall chum run. By this time numbers of Chinook crossing the border have been determined for meeting Canadian escapement goals. Several considerations should be kept in mind when applying call-in numbers to the fishing season. Fishing, commercially and for subsistence, is of primary importance, focus, and a major use of time during the summer season along the Yukon River. Many people who participate in the calls drop off if they are fishing. Other factors such as wildfire, where local trained firefighters leave the village, the passing of Elders, and challenges to fish processing in the fish camps due to wet weather, flies and other circumstances may interfere with participation on the calls. Narrow fishing “windows” and short notice of openings along with changing weather patterns make the fishing season extremely intense for fishers and Yukon communities.

<b>Teleconference data-GCI</b>		
<b>Call week</b>	<b>Call dates</b>	<b>#callers</b>
Week 1	6/7	81
Week 2	6/14	70
Week 3	6/21	72
Week 4	6/28	86
Week 5	7/5	71
Week 6	7/12	66
Week 7	7/19	49
Week 8	7/26	47
Week 9	8/2	42
Week 10	8/9	40
Week 11	8/16	34
Week 12	8/23	45
Week 13	8/30	31

***Topics on the Calls***

The 2016 fishing season on the Yukon River was a little less challenging than the previous two years due to an improved Chinook run that enabled managers and fishers to work together to meet escapement goals and allow some minor harvest of Chinook salmon. Providing an equitable sharing of Chinook subsistence harvesting opportunities was a key management goal discussed regularly on the calls. These topics and those of gear types to use and their challenges (dip nets), which some villages did not have, fishing opening timing, subsistence opportunities in the upper

river, high-water and concerns of fish camps lying idle and the children not learning their culture were repeated themes raised by fishers.

### ***Meeting Conservation Goals***

Of primary importance is to determine if we have met the goal of improving public awareness and fostering community partnerships and relationships focused on the conservative management of Canadian origin Yukon River Chinook and fall chum salmon. The teleconferences are one part of an annual cycle of building understanding and capacity through a coordinated approach using the pre-season planning meetings, teleconferences, YRDFA Board and Tribal council communications, the education exchanges and reports at other Yukon River fishery associated meetings. The pre-season planning meetings and teleconferences have some overlap in participants but when factored together reach a broader swath of key individuals, which is fishermen who must personally decide to make conservation choices. The teleconferences enable a broader representation of people to participate and some may not be as informed about the status of the salmon stocks and the pre-season management outlooks and management plans. This leads to a teleconference that is dynamic and evolving, sometimes covering new topics and sometimes reviewing the old. The YRDFA staff members who facilitate the calls have remained flexible and ready for the unexpected and unique questions and comments that may take place on the calls, striving to keep the conversation on track.

The calls are also a gauge for how much information the public has received pre-season and how informed they were going into the season based on how they respond to the information they are hearing on the teleconferences. Based on the cooperation that we received last year during the fishing season, we are led to believe that we have improved public awareness through this project in combination with our other outreach efforts. Community relationships by many of the participants have been built up over many years through other river-wide efforts to bring fishermen together. The teleconferences are a success, and by that we understand them to have played a role in supporting the growth and more positive conservation outcomes in relation to Chinook salmon and the improved meeting of Canadian and Alaskan escapement goals. The many years of communications and outreach efforts by state, federal, and non-profit groups like YRDFA have enabled the teleconferences to function with the ease and success we have seen in recent years. Additional mailings were quite helpful as part of this grant as YRDFA had received recent feedback that we were not sending out enough materials to the villages. Due to budget cuts our paper newsletter, that used to go out three times a year, was cancelled and these promotional materials were a welcome benefit of the extra remaining funds due to the lower teleconference costs.

### **Financial Statement**

The funds associated with this project were fully spent out. The budget detail does not give a full picture of the entire cost of the project. Other funding for supporting the teleconferences comes from the Office of Subsistence Management through the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Federal Research and Monitoring Program (FRMP). Going forward YRDFA will rely on the USFWS funding for the next several years for the Yukon River In-season Teleconference program.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The in-season salmon management teleconferences continue to be a forum that is utilized and valued by the public along the Yukon River and by state and federal management and research agencies. The calls can be challenging due to the random participation on the calls that brings with it unintentional topics being brought up that do not necessarily fit into the agenda of the calls. We do our best to mitigate these when brought up but the fact that the calls are open to the public leads to folks sharing what's important to them.

Considering the overarching goal, we strive for with all communications along the Yukon, the teleconference calls are a unique and key participatory tool for informing and gaining buy-in for conservation management goals on the river. During the 2016 season Yukon fishers in Alaska cooperated in an unprecedented show of support for conservation of Chinook salmon by not targeting them when asked, fishing for other species, working to avoid Chinook and releasing them if accidentally caught and, it is hoped, moderating their harvest when given the opportunity to catch Chinook salmon. As nearly all escapement goals were met for Canada and within Alaska, the present management system and associated management approaches appear to be working.

In balance the in-season salmon teleconferences are a one-of-a-kind communications effort for uniting the river in protecting and improving the fish populations Yukon River communities need. This annual, two-way conversation has informed and supported the present conservation ethics and practices on the river which are so vital to allowing Canadian bound Chinook salmon to return to their natal spawning grounds.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

YRDFA would like to thank the Yukon River Panel and the USFWS Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program for their support of the In-season Salmon Management Teleconferences. In addition to our funders YRDFA would like to thank everyone who participated in the 2016 weekly teleconferences, whether this was their first season, or they've been calling in for years. A strong, regular presence from all stakeholders—subsistence and commercial fishers, managers, Tribes, First Nations, processors, inter-tribal consortiums, and others—maximizes the effectiveness and utility of the calls and goes a long way in building understanding of the run in real time and the management decisions necessary throughout the drainage.