

Yukon River Panel, Communications Committee
Project CC-01-15

Yukon River In-Season Salmon Management Teleconferences
Final Report

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Study History: The Yukon River is the third longest river in North America and the longest river in Alaska. Originating in 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 45 rural communities along the Yukon River in Alaska and about 10 communities in the Canadian headwaters that rely on the river's salmon resources. They need access to consistent and updated information on the 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 the river. They share information about water levels, fishing conditions, harvest goals, fish quality and other details that help managers with their management decision making on a weekly basis. Teleconference calls during the salmon season were initiated by the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association 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 program is to improve public awareness and foster community partnerships and relations focused on the conservative management of Canadian origin Yukon River Chinook and chum salmon.

Abstract: The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) hosted weekly in-season teleconference calls during the 2015 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), were a means to exchange information on run timing, salmon abundance, and escapement data as the run progressed. 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 geographic area. Teleconferences lasted between 1-2 hours and were hosted through General Communications Inc. (GCI). Summaries of each call were written by YRDFA staff and distributed to teleconference participants following the calls and also posted to the YRDFA website. The Yukon River Panel and the Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Subsistence Management both fund the Yukon River in-season salmon management teleconferences.

Key Words: Alaska, Canada, Chinook, chum, commercial fisheries, fisheries management, in-season 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 more than 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 and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 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 mail out via e-mail and post on the YRDFFA website.

METHODS

Pre-Season

To organize and carry out weekly teleconference calls during the 2015 summer and fall fishing season, YRDFFA analyzed the 2014 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 the calls needed to focus on in-season issues, rather than external factors such as bycatch, to keep calls shorter and more productive. Other areas related to the calls such as the phone number, duration of calls, agenda items and meeting formats would remain the same.

The pre-season promotional work has been tapering down due to funding considerations as well as the fact that the in-season salmon management calls are well known along the Yukon River. The calls have been operational for over 12 years and there are many 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

2015 with the specific teleconference information including time of the call, call in number, agenda items and teleconference reporting format. Costs associated with the pre-season promotional items were covered by the Office of Subsistence Management Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program (OSM-FRMP) grant to YRDFA for the teleconferences.

In-Season

From June 2, 2015 through August 25, 2015, teleconference calls were hosted. YRDFA deputy director Wayne Jenkins facilitated most of the in-season salmon management teleconferences every Tuesday at 1 p.m. Alaska time and 2 p.m. Teleconferences were facilitated by director Jill Klein while Mr. Jenkins led the 2015 Education Exchange to Canada and was occupied with other duties. 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, emailed to teleconference participants following the calls and then posted to the YRDFA website.

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, who also fund the teleconferences.

RESULTS

In 2015, 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 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 report and the Yukon fishing communities in the Canadian headwaters contributed their reports.

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. 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 4 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 roll general 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.

In 2015, 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, issue which is outside of the management responsibilities and control of ADFG and USFWS managers, is repeatedly mentioned. These issues are important but time spent on them is distracting and takes time from other in-river discussions. We have begun to address this at the beginning of the calls and during the calls efforts are made to address the participant's comment and then to redirect the callers to stay focused on in-season management. Yukon River residents who rely on salmon for their food, income, and economy are looking for answers as to why the Chinook salmon are in decline. They can easily point to bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery as a direct source of mortality to those salmon. YRDFA has been involved for many years in the Bering Sea pollock bycatch issue and works to keep affected communities informed. Other topics such as mining in Canada were brought up as well. In direct response to a request to handle these type of issues being brought up, YRDFA staff paid greater attention to limit the conversation that followed these issues being raised by the public and to talk one-to-one with the individuals outside of the call to remind them of the purpose of the call and offer other ideas and venues for how to address their concerns.

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 YRDFA website.

Measure of Success

The project objectives were met. YRDFA 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 will enable 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 2015 season and a repeated effort to discuss the need for conservation with the public.

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

After many consecutive years of this program, it seems that the focus is not on the levels of participation and when people participate. We have tracked this information over time and it is has remained relatively consistent. For raw numbers see the chart below. As can be seen the call-in pattern starts at a low of 45 participants at the beginning of the fishing season, in this case the

early Chinook and summer chum run have not begun. But, quickly, by the third call-in week, calls have nearly doubled and remain high for six weeks, reflecting keen interest in what’s happening with the Chinook and summer chum salmon runs and the complex series of reports and management directions from the ADFG and USFWS managers. By week 8, call interest has dropped but continues at a moderate to low level until the end of the teleconference period. 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 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, 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 “time-windows” and short notice of openings make the fishing season extremely intense for fishers and Yukon communities.

Teleconference data-GCI		
Call week	Call dates	#callers
Week 1	6/2	45
Week 2	6/9	68
Week 3	6/16	89
Week 4	6/23	80
Week 5	6/30	68
Week 6	7/7	74
Week 7	7/14	83
Week 8	7/21	67
Week 9	7/28	56
Week 10	8/4	58
Week 11	8/11	50
Week 12	8/18	41
Week 13	8/25	42

Topics on the Calls

The 2015 fishing season on the Yukon River was challenging for the fishery managers and very tough for fishers in the face of a nearly full closure of Chinook salmon subsistence harvests. Balancing the subsistence harvest of other salmon species, such as summer and fall chum and Coho while avoiding Chinook was complicated by first runs starting late, high and low water levels, river debris, poor processing conditions (hot with flies) and in some villages, smoke and wildfire pulling fishermen away from home for fire-duty and several village evacuations. 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 and concerns of fish camps lying idle and the children not learning their culture.

Meeting Conservation Goals

Of primary importance is to determine if we have met the goal of improving public awareness and fostering community partnerships and relations focused on the conservative management of Canadian origin Yukon River Chinook and 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 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 call 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. YRDFA appreciates the reprofiling decision to allow extra funds from savings on our call expenses which we used for outreach posters and magnets for reminding folks of the teleconferences in 2015 (attached). We also mailed thank-you letters to the tribes. 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).

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 2015 season Yukon fishers in Alaska

cooperated in an unprecedented show of support for conservation of Chinook salmon by not targeting them and when fishing for other species, working to avoid Chinook and releasing them if accidentally caught.

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

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