

Yukon River Panel, Communications Committee
Project CC-01-14

Yukon River In-Season Salmon Management Teleconferences
Final Report

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Study History: The Yukon River is the longest river in Alaska, originating in western Alaska at the Bering Sea coast and moving through interior Alaska to the border just past Eagle into the Canadian headwaters. There are over 45 rural communities along the Yukon River in Alaska and about 10 communities in the Canadian headwaters that rely on the salmon resource. They need access to consistent and updated information on the management assessment projects carried out by state and federal fisheries agencies. Additionally, fisheries managers benefit from talking directly with fishermen who are on the grounds; they share information about water levels, fishing conditions, harvest goals, fish quality and other details that help the 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 a practical and useful method for discussing the complexities of salmon management and for gaining immediate real-time information from fishers along the expanse of the Yukon River.

Abstract: The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA) hosted weekly in-season teleconference calls during the 2014 Yukon River salmon fishery season, from June through August. The teleconference calls, held every Tuesday at 1 p.m. Alaska time (2 p.m. Yukon time), were a means to exchange information on run timing, abundance, and escapement data; discuss management strategies; facilitate open dialogue between users and management entities; and enable salmon resource users drainage-wide to communicate. In addition to reports of local observations, the calls provided information to fishers regarding research and escapement monitoring tools operated by management entities, and facilitated information sharing and capacity building amongst all interested parties. Calls were typically 1-2 hours in length. Summaries of each call were written and distributed to teleconference participants following the calls.

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 management teleconference program has provided a practical and useful method for fishers, processors, managers, and other stakeholders in Yukon River salmon fisheries to discuss the complexities of salmon management and gain immediate real-time information across the more than 2,000 mile expanse of the Yukon River. Facilitated by the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDFA), these teleconferences have enabled local users to provide valuable insight to fisheries managers on in-season salmon subsistence needs, river conditions, and abundance and quality of salmon available. In addition to reports of local observations, the calls have provided information to fishers regarding research and monitoring tools operated by management entities, and have facilitated information sharing and capacity building amongst all interested parties.

STUDY AREA

The Yukon River drainage

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this program are to:

- 1) Promote the in-season 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 YRDFA website.

METHODS

Pre-Season

To organize and carry out weekly teleconference calls during the 2014 summer and fall fishing season, YRDFA first looked back at the 2013 teleconferences, to see what worked and what did not. Also, YRDFA 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 lessened 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 the calls. A flyer was sent out to all Yukon River Tribal and city councils with the specific teleconference information on it such as time of the call; call in number, agenda items and teleconference reporting format were also listed. Costs associated with the pre-season promotional items were from the Office of Subsistence Management Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program grant to

YRDFA for the teleconferences.

In-Season

From May 26, 2014 through August 25, 2014, teleconference calls took place. The YRDFA executive director Jill Klein and the deputy director Wayne Jenkins took turns facilitating the in-season salmon management teleconferences every Tuesday at 1 p.m. Alaska time and 2 p.m. Yukon, Canada time. 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 at first emailed to teleconference participants following the calls and then posted to the YRDFA website.

Post-Season

YRDFA carried out reporting 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

This year YRDFA held 14 in-season management teleconferences, every Tuesday starting the last week in May in June, July, and August. The calls followed an agenda each week: opening with subsistence fishing reports; hearing from state and federal fisheries managers on their fishery assessments and management strategies; hearing from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in Canada and Yukon fishers in the Canadian headwaters.

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 Chinook salmon make it to the spawning grounds in Canada. The calls include members of the public that can call in and participate. These folks include fishermen and other fishing family members as well as tribal and/or city council members as well as people who regularly participate during winter meetings as part of advisory councils and other boards such as YRDFA and the Yukon River panel.

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 talk about in-river fisheries management. But over the years, we have seen people ask a lot of questions and make a lot of comments on the issue of salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea. We try to redirect the callers to stay focused on in-season management but 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 bring up bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery as a direct source of mortality to those salmon. 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

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 deliverables were met. YRDFA carried out all the teleconferences in-season to give fisheries managers and local fishing communities the opportunity to learn information from each other in-season about the fishing conditions. There was a sharing of information and ideas and in certain cases there was a building of understanding and capacity. This was done through consistent conversations that took place between fishers and managers on the status of the Chinook salmon run during the 2014 season and a repeated effort to discuss the need for conservation with the public. While it is hard to measure this, with repeated effort to discuss this over the salmon season there is the assumption that it started to make sense to people. There may have been people who did not agree with this or understand and support it. It is difficult during a public call to build understanding with a constantly changing participation base.

Progress towards completion is measured in the number of calls that take place and 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 abundant species. At this time, 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 learned this information over time and it has remained relatively consistent. What is interesting now to possibly measure is the part of our objective to build understanding and capacity. The teleconferences are part of an annual process of building understanding and capacity at various meetings. Unfortunately not all of the same people participate in the winter meetings as in the summer in-season management teleconferences. The calls enable other people to call in and they may not be as informed about the status of the salmon stocks and the pre-season management outlooks and plans. This leads to a teleconference that is dynamic and always changing. 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.

The tangible benefits from this project are that a regular teleconference took place each week in a standard time and format for the general public to call into. The calls provide a place for fishing communities and managers to utilize to share information. These calls are one of the only forums to do this in, but the public, including state and federal agencies and legislative offices that are not announced on the call know that this call is regularly scheduled and they can call in to hear an update on the salmon returns to the Yukon River and the test fisheries data and assessment projects. 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. Overall the teleconference calls continue to be widely utilized and will be refined from year to year and based on current issues needing to be addressed.

Financial Statement

This project was not fully spent out due to the low costs of the GCI conference center services. Their costs have become lower due to a change in the service platform they now utilize for calls.

The budget detail provides information on the costs that the Yukon River Panel covers for the teleconference project. The Office of Subsistence Management also covers a portion of the costs that are not included here.

CONCLUSIONS

The in-season salmon management teleconferences continue to be a forum that is utilized by the public along the Yukon River and the 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 topics being brought up but the sheer fact that the calls are open to public leads this to happen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

YRDFFA would like to thank the Yukon River Panel and the Fisheries Resources Monitoring Program for their support of the in-season salmon management teleconferences. In addition to our funders, YRDFFA would like to thank to everyone who participated in the 2014 weekly teleconferences, whether this was their first season or they've been calling for years. A strong, regular presence from all stakeholders—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 throughout the drainage.