

Board of Fisheries Adopts 7.5" Mesh for Yukon River

By Jill Klein, Executive Director

The State of Alaska Board of Fisheries met from January 26-31 to take action on proposals addressing Yukon River salmon. Among the proposals that passed was the amended language for Proposal 90 going to 7.5" mesh for commercial and subsistence gillnet fisheries. Management plan proposals 193 and 194 also passed, which allows commercial fishing to start on the fish in excess of a run of 900,000 for summer chum and 500,000 for fall chum, and allows a directed coho salmon fishery to start if the fall chum salmon projection exceeds 500,000 fish. Additionally, the Board passed management plan proposal 199, which allows for a directed coho salmon fishery under specific language.

While there were many proposals submitted to the State of Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) addressing Yukon River salmon, some of the more significant proposals were #88, 89, and 90. They all were submitted to address the current situation along the Yukon River: low salmon returns and in specific the quality of the salmon returning. People along the river have been seeing smaller fish, which is of concern to the continuation of the salmon runs and the people that depend on them. Perspectives differ depending on where you live on the Yukon River. Lower river people may still be seeing bigger fish and more fish as many stocks are entering the river all at one time. Upper river people see less fish and smaller fish as the fish get caught in various fisheries below them, turn into different tributaries to spawn, and lose oil content on their way up to their spawning grounds. There is concern over the biological nature of the salmon returns which includes the quality and quantity of the salmon returns, but the proposals that were submitted have been extremely divisive.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game, along with federal scientist Dr. Bromaghin, gave presentations on trends of salmon related to their sex, size, length, etc... and also on a 3-year study that used comparative mesh sizes in river by actual fishermen and a simulation study that modeled various mesh sizes and exploitation rates on salmon. All of this information, plus testimony by the public and a committee discussion among members of the public and some BOF members, led to the final deliberations taken by the full BOF.

YRDFA works by consensus. We need to have full consensus before we can support or oppose a proposal. We have been successful in the past twenty years working on fisheries management plans before the Board of Fisheries, and while we have tried to address the proposals that relate to the size of mesh, the depth of nets, and the prohibition of the use of gillnets in the Yukon River over the past three BOF cycles, we do not have consensus due to the complex nature of the problems and potential solutions before us.

YRDFA was hoping that a compromise during the meeting would have been reached, but it was clear mid-way through the committee process that no agreement would be made by the various sides working on this issue. Subgroups were working together, but it was a very clear split between the lower river and upper river even though the gillnet change to 7.5 mesh will be implemented along the entire river and will affect all fishing districts. There were also many discussions about trying to include all gear types in the conservation effort, which in this case would mean inclusion of fish wheels. No clear decision was found on how fish wheels would participate in this.

While the change from 8.5 to 7.5 meshes may not seem big in terms of the difference between the two, it will mean a big change to fishermen that have been fishing the same gear their entire lives. There is fear over who will be able to afford the new nets and how they will fish once they are in the river. With the overall goal that the smaller nets will catch smaller fish and send the bigger, female fish to their spawning grounds both in Canada and Alaska, this is a step towards conservation.