



KUSKOKWIM RIVER INTER-TRIBAL FISH COMMISSION

OUR RIVER, OUR PEOPLE, OUR FISH

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December 7, 2021

Representative Jared Huffman, CA
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Question for the Record from Representative Huffman

Dear Rep. Huffman,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a witness statement on behalf of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission for the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife hybrid legislative hearing on November 16, 2021. As you heard in my statement, KRITFC supports the provisions that your proposed legislation in H.R. 4690 will bring to the Magnuson Stevens Act.

Attached are my responses to the follow-up questions sent to me on November 23, 2021. I appreciate the extended time you and your staff allowed me so I could provide you with thorough answers. Please contact me at marypeltola@kritfc.org or (907) 545-6206 if you would like further clarifications.

Respectfully,

Mary Peltola
Executive Director, KRITFC

Attachment: Responses from Ms. Peltola

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, OCEANS, AND WILDLIFE
HYBRID LEGISLATIVE HEARING

November 16, 2021

2:00 p.m. (ET)

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 59, H.R. 4690, H.R. 5770

RE: Question for the Record for Mary Peltola from Representative Huffman
Responses from Ms. Peltola

1. What is your normal fishing allotment? How does that compare to the allotment of commercial interest in the area?

Indigenous subsistence fishing communities are experiencing a multi-year decline of Chinook and chum salmon on both the Kuskokwim and Yukon Rivers. This year, 2021, was the eighth year that Chinook salmon runs have been too low to support subsistence needs and the first year that once-abundant chum salmon returns have been even lower than Chinook salmon returns, resulting in significant restrictions on fishing for both species on both rivers. The historical average drainage-wide subsistence harvest of Kuskokwim Chinook salmon was approximately 85,500 fish per year, with each fish averaging 33 pounds each. Our recent 10-year average harvest of Chinook salmon is in the range of 20,000-40,000 fish with each Chinook salmon averaging 11 pounds. This is a stark reduction in numbers of Chinook salmon and an even more devastating loss of nutrition for Tribal citizens and rural residents due to ecosystem changes producing much smaller sizes of Chinook salmon returning to their natal streams.

There has not been a commercial season for Chinook salmon on the Kuskokwim River since the 1990's. Meanwhile, in 2021, over 15,000 Chinook salmon have been taken as bycatch and discarded in the commercial pollock fishery. This bycatch includes Chinook salmon from throughout Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. On average, 40-60% of these bycaught Chinook salmon are bound for Interior and Western Alaska Rivers, almost all of which had no subsistence fishing or extremely reduced harvests this year.

Compounding the crisis, chum salmon runs also dropped precipitously this year. The chum salmon return on the Kuskokwim has historically been in the millions. There are multiple highly productive chum tributaries on the Kuskokwim, such as the Kwethluk, Kogruluk, and George Rivers, which historically saw millions or multiple millions of chum salmon per summer. Shockingly, this summer saw perhaps between 5-10% of the normal chum returns (and this is a liberal estimate). In 2021, over 500,000 chum salmon were taken as bycatch and discarded by the pollock fishery. According to genetic analysis from 2019, approximately 16% of these chum salmon were bound for Western Alaska rivers, including the Kuskokwim.¹

¹ C.M. Kondzela, et al., NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-AFSC-422: *Genetic Stock Composition Analysis of Chum Salmon from the Prohibited Species Catch of the 2019 Bering Sea Walleye Pollock Trawl Fishery* (Aug. 2021)

The total allowable catch for the trawl fleet is in the millions of metric tons. In addition to the pressure the trawl fleet is imposing on chum salmon, the State's Commercial Fisheries Division under the ADF&G has allowed over 1 million chum salmon to be caught and sold in the Area M/False Pass Commercial chum salmon fishery. Past genetic stock identification work indicates that the Area M/False Pass Commercial fishery also intercepts Kuskokwim chum salmon.

Subsistence fishermen consume less than 1% of the State's resources when we have access to abundant returns. Compared to the commercial industry and commercial fleets, our subsistence fishermen, who are only trying to feed our families, are literally fighting for crumbs. We are being aced out of our historical <1% of salmon.

2. How would enacting H.R. 4690 address the impacts of excessive amounts of bycatch on Indigenous fishers and change the conditions that resulted in your fishing allotment being reduced to 0%?²

Chinook and chum salmon declines are due to several factors, including bycatch and climate change. Climate change poses a real and ongoing threat to our way of life and fisheries in the region, and our current management process under the Magnuson-Stevens Act is not built to adapt to the challenges climate change is posing. H.R. 4690 makes important changes to the MSA to better adapt to climate change. Incorporating climate considerations throughout the management process will provide important direction to the Councils to consider and assess the climate change impacts on fisheries. In the long run these changes will help every species in the ecosystem, including salmon, especially if these considerations must translate into action to ensure resilient and sustainable fisheries and fishing communities into the future.

Enacting H.R. 4690 would also require greater reduction of bycatch, addressing the inequities in the current system that allow for bycatch to continue unheeded while Indigenous fishermen are not allowed to fish at all. National Standard 9 current only requires bycatch reduction "to the extent practicable." For too long practicability has been an excuse for not reducing bycatch. H.R. 4690 addresses this critical issue by removing the phrase "to the extent practicable" from National Standard 9. This very important change will reorient the MSA towards the original purpose of reducing bycatch.

Finally, H.R. 4690 would add two designated Tribal voting seats to the NPFMC. This change would provide the Tribes who have stewarded our oceans and fisheries since time immemorial seats at the table and voice in the decisions that impact our lives. This would enable Tribes to bring our perspective and experiences to the decisions made at the NPFMC, allowing us to have

² I wish to convey that Indigenous fishermen do not have any "bycatch." Every fish caught is respected and eaten and no part of any fish is wasted. The term "bycatch" is an oxymoron and anathema to Indigenous people. The freshwater, saltwater, land, and air provide many food sources and we consume what we harvest, including all types of fish. If they are not edible by humans, many people use the fish as dog food. Salmon not fit for human consumption fed to dogs is also protected for customary and traditional uses under both state and federal (ANILCA Title VIII) subsistence laws.

a say in the management of bycatch and other effects from the industrial fisheries occurring in our waters of the Bering Sea.