



## COPPER RIVER WATERSHED PROJECT

COPPER RIVER

# Runner

SPRING 2018



Photo: DFW/Chris Johnson



Photo: CWR/Chris Johnson

## FIRST COPPER RIVER SALMON HARVESTERS' ROUNDTABLE

*Held at Alaska Board of Fish Meeting, December, 2017*

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"No shots were fired"—that's how I described the first Copper River Salmon Harvesters' Roundtable meeting, held during the Alaska Board of Fish's five-day regulatory meeting, to folks who wanted to know how it went. That's not the usual benchmark for meeting success, but according to a book called *Cruel Conversations*, this gathering met all the criteria for a tense situation: stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.

The resource at the center of this gathering is Chinook salmon: for the past decade, Chinook (King) salmon runs across the State of Alaska have been below average (Alaska Department of Fish & Game, ADF&G). Contention among user groups over who gets to harvest Chinook salmon and other salmon during periods of decline consumes a lot of energy among the Copper River's salmon harvest user groups. Borrowing heavily from the approach used by the Island Institute of Maine and its work with the lobster industry, we proposed to host a forum that provides a venue for fishermen to share their observations of *on-the-water* conditions and changes over time in a non-regulatory setting. The Island Institute makes a point of creating a setting for fishermen to talk with each other that is not dominated by fisheries management or scientists.

Individually, tens of thousands of fishermen make up the collection of Copper River "stakeholders." The term is defined as "anyone whose decision-making authority" (Chavaler, 2004). Users fall into four groups of fishermen for which the State of Alaska issues salmon fishing permits in the Copper River watershed: subsistence fishermen, personal use fishermen, sport fish anglers, and commercial fishing permit holders.

Altogether, 19 people representing salmon harvest user groups, a mayor, a Board of Fish Commissioner, Native Village of Eyak tribal council fish biologists, and ADF&G fish biologists spent an evening together, and all agreed that the dialogue was worthwhile and should continue. "This is one of the most productive meetings I've been to" commented Mark Somerville, the ADF&G Sportfish Biologist for the Copper Basin, in planning for this meeting last fall, someone suggested we take two to three minutes for one person from each user group to describe their fishery. What was budgeted for 15 minutes on the agenda lasted an hour and a half! But that speaks to the value of the exchange.

We plan to make the Roundtable an annual gathering at which dispatchers, sports fishing anglers, fish wheel operators, and commercial fishermen can meet in a non-regulatory setting to ask the questions that matter to them about the trends that affect all salmon user groups. We'll include researchers or managers to make presentations in response to those questions, and work to build relations among the user groups.