



Copper River Watershed Project

Upriver and down, salmon are common ground

COPPER RIVER SALMON HARVEST ROUNDTABLE

DECEMBER 1, 2017

PARTICIPATING:

Thea Thomas, drift gillnetter
Paul Harrell, Vice Pres. CDA
Shawn Gilman, drift gillnetter
Wade Buscher, drift gillnetter
Larry St. Amand, fish wheel permit holder
Mike Mikelson, drift gillnetter
John Whissel, Native Village of Eyak
Jamie Foode, Native Village of Eyak
Dave Sarafin, NPS and fish wheel user
Mark Somerville, ADF&G
Davin Holen, Alaska Sea Grant, facilitator

Chuck Derrick, Pres., CDA
Robert Ruffner, Board of Fish
Bill Lindow, drift gillnetter
Stephanie Holcomb, sportfishing guide
Charles Russell, ADF&G
Tommy Sheridan, Silver Bay Seafoods
Matt Piche, Native Village of Eyak
Clay Koplin, Mayor of Cordova
Jeremy Botz, ADF&G
Wes [Strasburger](#), UFA student
Kristin Carpenter, CRWP

MEETING SUMMARY

Introduction and welcome to the Roundtable from the Copper River Watershed Project:

Kristin Carpenter: crucial conversations.

Participants: give your name, and what is your connection to the Copper River?

Stephanie: guide King salmon fishing, own river front sport fishing business on the Klutina River.

Robert Ruffner: special connection to the Copper, have rafted the Copper River with my family many times.

Bill Lindow: been drift-netting on the Copper for 40 years now, solid connection culturally and economically to the river.

Clay Koplin: representing the City, salmon is my favorite food, avid subsistence fisherman.

Chuck Derrick: president of CDA, been dipnetting Chitina fisheries since 1970s. No other state has anything like this. Something I wanted to save.

Paul Harrell: dipnetting since 2000. Like to teach people how to dipnet. Proxy for disabled vets and seniors in Fairbanks.

Shawn Gilman: lived in Cordova most of my life, gillnetted for 37 years, raised a family on the resource. Take a personal interest in the health of the Copper River.

Larry St. Amand: operated a fishwheel on the Copper River since 1967, Copper River and Klutina have been my playground my whole life. Concerned about spawning grounds. Seen a big decline in size and numbers of kings in my life time.

Wade Buscher: drift gillnetter, been fishing here since 2000. Fished other areas in the State since the 80s. Think we can all come together on this king issue because it's so important to all of us.

Charles Russell: first came to Cordova to work for NVE on the fish wheel project, fell in love with the Copper, now work with ADF&G, will try not to leave Cordova.

Dave Sarafin: living in Basin since 1999, fisheries biologist with NPS, get some fish each year from a fish wheel.

Jeremy Botz: have been in Cordova since 2006, managing gill net fishery since 2011. Grew up in commercial fishing family in Kodiak. Feel passionate about sustainable fisheries management.

Mark Somerville: first job with PWSAC was lake investigations. Spent a lot of time in upper Copper sampling lakes. In PWS for 18 years, back in the Basin working for ADF&G.

Thea Thomas: gillnetter, connection to Copper is it's given me the best job anyone could want.

Matt Piche: work for NVE as a Fish Biologist, manage the Chinook salmon mark/recapture project.

Jamie Foode: work at NVE as intern in Environment and Nat. Resources. Third generation commercial fishing family.

John Whissel: used to run NVE fish wheel program til I found Matt to run it for me. Best decision I ever made. Been working in Alaska since early 2000s, largely up north til moved to Cordova. User group conflict is a real issue, unique here because we're not squabbling over the last three fish, there's a real resource here. The number of user groups could be a benefit if everyone gets together.

Tommy Sheridan: relative newcomer, director of Community Affairs for Silver Bay, defended my thesis yesterday, have a real interest in fishery policy, love salmon.

Mike Mikelson: grew up at Whitshed, 10 miles from Cordova, we went subsistence fishing in the skiff, in 2010 I started gillnetting, and I absolutely love it. I try to be involved because I travel to Yukon villages and see the conflicts there.

A Word from Dave Cousens, Maine Lobstermen's Association

Started our roundtable in 2005, 15 – 20 fishermen in New England. Some people had been fishing for 30, 40 years. Found it to be a lot more beneficial than we thought it would be. As year 3 - 4 rolled around, they started bringing in experts. Fishermen found it interesting, started telling their friends about it. Every fisherman is scared to death about how climate change is going to affect us – water is warm where we are, 60 F range, warming the fastest rate of anywhere in the world except for one place in Japan.

Trying to mitigate the problems as best we can. Gulf of Maine landed 18 million pounds 5 years ago, this year was around 500,000.

(Dave has participated in a Fishermen's Climate Roundtable sponsored by the Island Institute since 2005. Dave is the President of the Maine Lobstermen's Association.)

Shawn: are there weekend lobstermen who fish?

Dave C.: yes, 1,500

Dave C.: main interest was in scallop industry, groundfish

Chuck Derrick: conflicts with recreational lobstermen?

Dave C.: not a big deal, they have much fewer traps.

Wade Buscher: with climate change, seeing a change in size of lobster?

Dave C.: water temperatures affect larval survival. Further south, CT, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, about the time they were hitting 64 F for 15 days straight, lobsters got shell disease.

Paul H: do the lobsters move north?

DC: sweet spot is Maine, it's the right temperature here. 100 million pounds over the 30 year average (25 – 30 million pounds). Not new ground, just an explosion in the biomass. Drastic drop this year though. Won't know the figures til March.

Charles Russell: can you switch to different fisheries?

Dave C.: fisheries are managed separately, shrimp fishery has collapsed, haven't been new scallop permits issued, groundfish ... No transferability here, when you don't want one anymore, you can't get one anymore. (??) Have to have a state AND a federal permit also to land lobster in Maine.

Poll Everywhere question (via text messaging):

How is the Copper River important to your lifestyle?

(pick list of responses: livelihood, recreation, spiritual, all of the above)

29% said "livelihood"

71% said "all of the above", livelihood, recreation, spiritual.

Description of Copper River fisheries by User Group:

One person from each fishery group was asked to describe how his or her fishery works.

Drift gillnet fishery, Shawn Gilman: limited entry drift gillnet, allowed 900' of net, no larger than 6" mesh, await ADF&G announcement in mid-May, go out and test waters, have been doing that since I was a kid. Last 10 years we've had quite a few early events, run has been early on average, one year that was backed up by ice. Go out and

catch a minimal amount of fish for first week. Counter gets going upriver, management lets us fish more. Sample fish at canneries. Leading up to that, get boat ready, get gear ready. Led the state in quality control, keep a pretty high quality product. High demand for Copper River salmon that's been ... Season starts mid-May, longest I've ever gone is mid-October. Have to try to stay out of the breakers, not go over the line. I'm a net hoarder: have 25 nets, a brand-new net is \$6,000.

Subsistence Fishwheel, Larry St. Amand: State fishery starts June 1, goes til October. I run mine til Sept. 1 because of moose hunting. Wheel fishes 24 hours a day, I monitor it once a day. When I had a dead box, started Have a live box now, can keep 100 fish alive in it, all the small fish go through it. King salmon do fight to get out, beat themselves up, reds don't. It's a challenge to get a big king out of there. Much more advantageous to build it right, good and strong, floats pretty high, that's why I can have a live box.

One year I got 300 fish by noon, another 400 by 6 p.m.

I have 75 people that use my wheel. Have to drive across private property, then row a boat across the slough. People camp by the wheel. Don't use a federal permit, have a State permit. Sad thing is a dead box, if you catch a king, they are dead. People throw back what they can't keep because of their permit.

Mark Somerville: if you're in a good spot you're getting 60 – 70 fish/day. People are fishing the wheel, may all of a sudden get 200 fish, they only wanted 40, but those are their fish. They give them away. Some years, fish are heavy, some wheels do really well because of location. My wheel doesn't fish very well at all, can get 30 fish a day. I'll turn my wheel off if we're not fishing.

Wade: is there any enforcement?

Mark S.: it's never enough, we have two guys to cover 24,000 square miles. I can't walk along the wheels and check everyone's wheels unless I get in a boat, but have to have two people in a boat. Can't go across private property unless there's cause. (Blue shirts and brown shirts.) No enforcement on the federal side. Fishery is managed through NPS but it's enforced by USFWS. Al Cain's take on it is 85% of population tries to do the right thing, about 10% are on the edge, 5 – 10% act like criminals.

A fishwheel user has to record fish caught on their permit before they leave the site. Same as Cordova's subsistence fishery but don't have to turn in the harvest count til end of season.

Thea: people ask me all the time ...

Mark: most people put down 500 fish for two or more in a household. "Put the max down." Can purchase fish from a federal subsistence permit holder. Cannot rent out a wheel.

Larry St. Amand: people do rent their wheel. People sell their fish, don't say they don't.

Sportfish Fishery, Stephanie Holcomb, owner, Salmon Grove Campground & Fishing Charters: people ask me all the time if I want to buy king salmon. For me, it is subsistence because I feed my family. People come up to the office and say “hey, I want to catch a king”. Not 50% of people actually catch a king. We don’t go to spawning holes and fish spawning holes, that’s not what’s happening. July 1 – XX 10 (what is the season?). We start doing trips in ... Only half of people who catch a king, actually keep them.

Water in the Klutina and Tonsina, every storm has been rain below 3,000’ – snow pack isn’t building up. In May, rivers aren’t coming up fast. It’s affecting run timing.

Mark: how did last few years of restrictions affect you?

Stephanie: horrible, I couldn’t buy my kid dinner and Christmas presents. When king fishery opened this year, I went out every single day. Was hard to make it on just reds. I was able to keep the property. We do do multi-day trips, people are coming for the kings. Don’t care about trout, whitefish, reds. There should be a limit on the number of guide licenses – should be limited entry for sportfish guides.

Larry: sportfishing in the 90s, people were swinging guns at each other.

Stephanie: river is self-limiting, it’s a little technical. One past guide used to drop guides off at the fishing holes.

Mark S: when kings were strong, late 1990s was the peak, escapement was 12,000 kings, there used to be 50 – 60 guides, jet boat guides on the Klutina. Most are working with rafts now. Jet boats are an expense. Now there are 8 guide services, ...

Stephanie: most of those services are owner operated, they don’t employ other guides.

Bill Lindow: average number of people per day?

Stephanie: max capacity is 15 people per day, average is 2 boats out per day, 8 people. Princess contracts with every guide service but mine, I don’t work with them. I work with Alaskans from Fairbanks, Anch. Have been able to take 1 king per year since 2009.

Matt Piche: how do guides keep track of kings harvested?

Mark S: guide log book. But I don’t use it as a management tool. If Stephanie took a group to Lake Louise, she would have had to record trout caught there in a log book but we don’t do that anymore. We’re only tracking salmon now.

Larry: hate the word subsistence because it divides people. People felt entitled

Personal Use Dipnet fishery, Chuck Derrick: Personal use dipnet fishery used to open June 1, now earliest it opens is June 7. Latest could be June 10. Our season is put off a little later now, to share our part of the burden of conservation when the inside

closures were instituted. Lot of dipnetters live in Fairbanks, lot of people from southcentral coming up to Chitina because of crowding in southcentral. 670 miles roundtrip, some times we spend two days and catch no fish. Can watch the sonar counts to know when to fish. Early in the season it's a two week travel time from the sonar counter to Chitina, look for a series of days when you see high sonar counts. Have to watch weather that's occurred prior to when you want to go – 2 -3 warm sunny days, lots of glacier melt, stretches above Woods Canyon when people dipnet in waders, when water level starts coming up, canyon is so restricted, big logs start coming through the canyon, lose spots to fish, can go down there in high water, you'll come back with very few fish. Hem's Hotline: water's high, weather's warm, not worth coming down. When water starts dropping, fish come up like gangbusters. A number of years ago when limit was 45, my limit at the time was 85 and I got that in 2.5 hours. Rare but can occur if you hit it right. Tails have to be clipped. We're allowed one king salmon on our limit. Like everyone else it's been very restrictive. We all know it turned out not to be as bad as was forecasted. Can fish along McCarthy Road (??) or pay \$110 to Hem for 12 hour charter. Now there's a guide operator that used to guide out of his large raft, he has moved into PU fishery with guided dipnet floats (he's the one that Ahtna is targeting in their proposal to stop dipnetting out of boats). "Culture and tradition advances with technology".

Mark S: Chuck, do you fish the same location every time?

CD: back before the big earthquake, you could actually drive all the way down to Haley Creek. Could fish off of different points, after earthquake, there were big slides, the trestle has problems, I've had a knee replacement so can't hike down the hill and pack fish back up the hill. My proposal was intended to try to open up the congestion.

Copper River Science and Monitoring: Native Village of Eyak's Chinook Mark/Recapture Project to Estimate In-river Abundance

Matt Piche, NVE Fisheries Biologist, gave a short presentation on NVE's Chinook mark/recapture methodology and figures.

Chuck: why don't you show your mark/recapture data?

Matt: the mark/recapture data aren't as relevant as the in-river abundance number to most people. Data get run through statistical programs to produce the in-river abundance number.

John Whissel: people mis-use the data.

Mark Somerville: can't use this data in-season for management because it needs to be adjusted.

Matt: feel confident that our mortality rate is pretty low. Other sample efforts **put XX** down the esophagus of a fish and they have low mortality rate, and we don't even do that.

Chuck: didn't realize how our proposal to extend the dipnet use area would affect the fish wheel. Might not have submitted it if we understood that.

Facilitated discussion:

What are your biggest questions about fisheries science in the Copper River watershed?

What are some of the biggest changes that you've seen in the region?

SH: just the last few seasons, when low pressure storms come through, below 3,000', it's all rain. When spring comes, it should be raging but water levels are low. We get light snow, cold winds, snow blows away. Tributaries to the Copper are seeing low water levels. No snowpack below 3,000'.

John Whissel: Copper River itself ran low this year. Science study of icefields behind Juneau, they estimate they'll be gone in 120 years. That's something that we're trying to look at for Copper River – we've got three different ice fields that drain into Copper River. We're looking at a similar situation, but we have colder temps. than Juneau, but are the next generation of fishers going to be fishing a rain-driven river rather than snow pack? That's something we should be thinking about – the life span of these glaciers.

Mike: hear about ponds filling in along the Yukon, is that happening in the Basin?

Thea: yes, surface waters are drying up. Permafrost is melting, so ponds/wetland complexes are draining into the "active layer" of soil. (Note: see Riordan paper, 2006, "Shrinking ponds on subarctic Alaska based on 1950 – 2002 remotely sensed images.)

Larry: earthquake changed topography so that surface waters have dried up. Copper River used to stabilize, glaciers kept it high for six weeks. Chitina River has a huge amount of glaciers draining into it. Doesn't seem to be opening up more spawning habitat. Dumbfounded by how much of Klutina and Valdez glacier have melted. Klutina River used to be filled with silt. But now you can see 1.5' down.

Stephanie: that changes all the time, two years ago it was muddy.

Larry: in 74 – 75 (later?), changed rainbow fishing regulations in the Gulkana River so that there's no chance for a sockeye. Locals aren't interested in catching them because they can't keep them. You never caught a rainbow when I was a kid. Haven't ever caught a steelhead but have seen them, Manker Creek.

Stephanie: there are more rainbows every year (**in Gulkana River, or other rivers too?**).

Changes in water, turbidity, rain, snow pack, permafrost thaw. Other changes noted?

Mike Mikelson: how do you feel about your confidence as a biologist to predict?

Mark S: Ken Roberson flew a lot, but we realized that we were only seeing 40% of the population. We figured out we could fly the streams but a lot of fish are in glacier

streams and flying doesn't get us that much more information. Aerial survey doesn't determine abundance but it does give us distribution. Radio telemetry gives us an idea of distribution, have monitoring tower on Gulkana and we can see that so we fly it, gives us a good idea. Can fly Klutina for early portion in clear water streams. NVE gives us ...

Bill Lindow: do you want to do another telemetry study? Do you have money for it?

Mark: I think NVE with their PIT tags is the future. If we could find a cheap way to get antenna arrays in more streams, would give us a much better clue about where fish are going.

Davin: do you think this kind of meeting is worth pursuing?

Mike: there are some proposals that could have been avoided if we'd had some dialogue among users.

Matt:

Clay: valuable to keep having this kind of conversation because it helps focus on the resource rather than each type of fisherman protecting his position.

Mark S: this is one of the more productive meetings I've heard.

Paul: we're all concerned about the health of the fishery. If we're doing something on our end that is hurting, we should know about it.

Shawn: it's good to have a rapport.