



November 9, 2023

Field Hearing titled, “The Impact of the Historic Salmon Declines on the Health and Well-Being of Alaska Native Communities Along Arctic, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers”

Tanana Chiefs Conference Testimony: Brian Ridley

My name is Brian Ridley and I serve as the Chief-Chairman of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, which serves 37 federally recognized sovereign Tribal governments and 43 tribal communities located in the Interior Alaska whose homelands approximate the size of Texas. I am a Tribal Citizen of Eagle, Alaska, located on the Yukon River at the Canadian border. My family is Han Gwichin and we have relatives on both sides of the Canadian border. The Tribes along the Yukon, particularly those upriver, have completely shouldered all of the ramifications of the salmon collapse, yet they are not complicit in the decline.

The indigenous people of the TCC region have been living in a relationship with salmon since time immemorial. Western scientists recently documented our customary and traditional use of salmon in the Tanana Valley beginning at least 11,000 years ago. This is the earliest evidence of human relationships with salmon in all of North America. Our people are salmon people. Our health and the health of the salmon are linked, the salmon suffer and our people suffer.

The science is clear, it is not a debate: all Yukon River salmon stocks are in dire peril. The State of Alaska is telling us that the only way that Canadian Chinook and fall chum salmon stocks can be rebuilt is with hatcheries. However, recent science clearly demonstrates that hatcheries are not the solution as the State of Alaska and many others have suggested.

Many things contribute to the declines of Yukon River salmon populations, from climate change, heat stress, interception fisheries, bycatch, competition with hatchery fish, ichthyophonus, rising ocean temperatures and ocean acidification. However, we must focus on those areas within direct human control and we must take management actions immediately. Calling for more research is not enough.

Salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea commercial fisheries, including pollock, has been blamed by many for the demise of salmon fisheries in the Yukon River and throughout coastal western Alaska.

There's a reason for this: as of today, the prohibited species catch of salmon is over 130 thousand salmon, the vast majority of which are chum. While federal staff and NPFMC managers continue to diminish the impact of salmon bycatch in federal fisheries of the Bering Sea, we know that every salmon matters whether it's in the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, or attempting to reach spawning grounds in Canada on the Yukon River. Trawlers throw our fish away and keep fishing. While our fisheries are closed. Our smokehouses empty.

All but bycatch allows the pursuit of annual fishery disaster declarations for salmon fisheries for the Yukon River. Bycatch, on the other hand, is controlled by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and not an allowable cause for a declaration of fisheries disaster under the



MSA. Most troubling is the fact that federal fishery disaster declarations are largely for commercial fisheries economic losses. However, under the MSA, loss of a subsistence fishermen may receive a disaster declaration if an economic fishery disaster hinders the customary and traditional selling, bartering, and trading economy of the fishery.

This is absolutely the case along the Yukon River, where depleted salmon runs have prevented our salmon people from fishing, and from participating in traditional economic practices of selling, bartering, and trading. Further, totally unaddressed through existing federal processes is the loss of Tribal food sovereignty and food security, the ability to teach our children and transmit Indigenous Knowledge related to salmon stewardship, including providing for healthy salmon and salmon populations, processing, preparation, and storing. Entire social networks, health, and wellbeing has been devastated. Our children have never handled salmon, our fishermen slump into depression and the results are devastating our communities.

While the state and federal government have continued conducting studies on the impacts of climate change, debating the impacts of bycatch and intercept fisheries, and subsidizing commercial fisheries, here is what we and our member Tribes have been doing:

- We have not fished. We implemented a self-imposed moratorium in an attempt to allow spawning fish the best possible chance, which resulted in meeting Chinook salmon border passage goals into Canada that year.
- We have left fish camps empty – many of our children have not fished in their lifetime.
- We were told to buy 7.5 inch mesh nets for our people, so we bought 7.5 inch nets
- We were told to buy 6 inch nets for our people, so we bought 6 in nets
- We were told to buy 4 inch nets for our people, so we bought 4 in nets
- To provide protein, sustenance, and heritage, we are now supporting commercial fisheries by buying salmon for our people; in 2022 we distributed over 90 thousand pounds of salmon including purchase, shipping, charters, storage, and packaging, and in 2023 we distributed another 90 thousand pounds.
- We have educated ourselves on ocean fisheries science;
- We have spent thousands on legal action and advocacy including:
 - Ensuring passage of Resolutions at the Alaska Federations of Natives and National Congress of American Indians urging for the mitigation of intercept fisheries and trawler fleet bycatch;
 - Facilitating historic Tribal representation to seek BOF action to mitigate intercept and protect subsistence fisheries as required by law – they took no action in a 3 to 4 vote, not unanimous;
 - Continuing attendance at the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council to address ongoing bycatch and destructive trawler fleet fishing practices – again to no avail, as these boards are made up of industry representatives responsible for overfishing our oceans;
 - Briefed and requested intervention from our state legislature – to no avail;
 - Briefed and requested Secretarial intervention and use of withdrawal authority – to no avail;
 - Left with little choice, we finally have engaged in litigation in an attempt to have NOAA/NMFS follow the law.



I am here to ask you, the SCIA, Congress and the Federal Government, to uphold the promise Congress made to our people during land claims. I am here to ask you to uphold your trust responsibility to our Tribal Governments and citizens as enshrined in Federal Indian Law. We are urging the Committee to work with the Alaska Congressional Delegation, including Congresswoman Peltola, the US House and Senate Natural Resources Subcommittees, and the Administration to help bring our fish back. Our asks:

- Stop subsidizing the pollock and cod industries through the USDA practice of purchasing ‘surplus’ pollock and cod trawled from the Bering Sea under the section 32 program.
- Stop minimizing the impact of trawlers and of bycatch, and the LONG TERM CUMULATIVE IMPACTS associated with this practice. In any other harvest of fish and wildlife, the word for ‘bycatch’ is wanton waste.
- Amend and reauthorize the MSA to:
 - adequately provide for Disaster Declaration and subsequent relief for loss of subsistence fisheries and the ways of life they support;
 - add at least two Tribal seats to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council appointed by the Secretary of the Interior.
- Relocate the National Marine Fisheries Service from the Department of Commerce to the Department of the Interior to center sustainability of fisheries ecosystems and food security over economic interests of multi-billion dollar industrial commercial fishing corporations without regard for ecosystem impacts.
- Introduce legislation recognizing Alaska Native Tribal Hunting and Fishing Rights.
- Per the Congressional Promise, utilize DOI Secretarial Authority to “protect the subsistence needs of the Natives.” This could include the entire Yukon River, and critical state and federal waters of the South Alaska Peninsula currently managed by the Alaska Board of Fisheries, and bycatch hot spots within the Bering Sea.
- Ensure Congress, and all agencies within the federal government, within the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, Interior, and State uphold their Federal Trust obligations to the federally recognized Tribes of all Alaska as mandated by Federal Indian Law.

Mahsi’ Choo.