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"Protect and Promote All Wild Fisheries and Traditional Cultures within the Yukon River Drainage"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Western Alaskan's Appeal to Governor Dunleavy

[August, 29, 2022, Anchorage, AK] Thirty residents from the Bristol Bay, Norton Sound, Yukon and Kuskokwim (BBAYK) regions of Alaska met with Governor Dunleavy and the Commissioner of Fish and Game today appealing to them to use their power to stop the interception of fish bound for the spawning grounds in the Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim (AYK) region.

Fists pounded the table as the frustration over the intercept of Chinook and chum salmon continues to happen in the Area M fishery. Those fishermen rake in an average of \$647,000 per vessel while subsistence users in the AYK stand on the banks. Stricter management of Area M is long overdue.

Robin Samuelson, of Dillingham, Alaska, told the Governor and Commissioner of Fish and Game that they have the power to limit interception of Yukon and Kuskokwim bound chum and Chinook salmon in Area M June fisheries. *"Our constitution clearly states that fisheries must be managed for sustained yield and it's not happening in the Yukon and Kuskokwim regions."* Samuelson said.

It was stated that this issue has likely been going on since the 1960's where Area M fishers, targeting sockeye salmon bound for Bristol Bay, are catching upwards of 2.5 million chum salmon bound for other areas. Not all are bound for the AYK but roughly 50% are and when AYK escapement goals aren't being met it becomes clear that every fish matters and restrictions cannot be put strictly on AYK residents.

Concerns about the near-complete loss of subsistence salmon fishing in the AYK brought together 15 organizations asking Governor Dunleavy for this meeting. The survival of the people in the AYK is at stake as we witness the dramatic declines of some or all species of salmon in Norton Sound, and on the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers.

On the Kuskokwim River, subsistence users have experienced more than a decade of depressed Chinook salmon returns coupled with precipitous crashes of chum and coho salmon. With these stark declines, local subsistence users continue to sacrifice meeting their harvest needs to meet escapement goals and rebuild these salmon populations. Furthermore, conservation closures in place to protect Chinook, chum, and coho salmon prevent subsistence fishers from meeting their needs with other healthy stocks, like sockeye salmon and whitefish.

Kevin Whitworth, Executive Director of the Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, said, *“There have been salmon declines in the past on the Kuskokwim River, but never have multiple species all crashed at the same time. We are experiencing a multi-year, multi-species salmon decline that is causing a food security and ecological crisis across the drainage.”*

The Yukon River communities are bearing the brunt of this loss, too, as they are seeing historic lows of Chinook salmon entering the river while the chum salmon have not reached the 300,000 mark to allow for subsistence harvest. A mere 44,581 Chinook salmon were counted at the Pilot Station sonar with 12,025 passing the Eagle sonar, heading to the spawning grounds in Canada.

“The State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game cannot stand by while the Yukon River salmon fishery is failing and continue to allow an intercept fishery to resume as normal.” stated Serena Fitka, executive director of the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association.

Chief Executive Officer of the Association of Village Council Presidents, Vivian Korthuis said, *“We are 149 Tribes and nearly 100,000 people asking Governor Dunleavy to protect our Way of Life. Our message of urgency must be heard as we try and survive the many layers of challenges our families and communities are experiencing-one disaster on top of another. We have witnessed a Public Safety Disaster, Pandemic Disaster, Food Security Disaster (salmon crash) and know that the ripple effects of these disasters will last for generations. The message to the Governor’s office is that something must be done to allow fish to pass through Area M and get them to their spawning grounds so we can hope for a better tomorrow. We want to continue the dialog with the Governor. We know that inaction is not an option.”*

Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang recommended going to the Board of Fisheries and asking them to make the necessary changes to the regulations. There is a conservation and food security issue at stake here. The Commissioner must do more than redirect the people of the AYK. We’ve asked him to support an upcoming proposal to the Board of Fisheries that would limit Area M fishers to conserve and protect chum and Chinook salmon bound for the AYK based on a conservation concern.

BBAYK residents asked for a second meeting with the Governor in two months to further discuss solutions and to take action.
