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Scarcity of King Salmon Hurt Alaskan Fishermen

By **STEFAN MILKOWSKI**

MARSHALL, Alaska — Just a few years ago, king [salmon](#) played an outside role in villages along the Yukon River. Fishing provided meaningful income, fed families throughout the year, and kept alive long-held traditions of Yup'ik Eskimos and Athabascan Indians.

But this year, a total ban on commercial fishing for king salmon on the river in Alaska has strained poor communities and stripped the prized Yukon fish off menus in the lower 48 states. Unprecedented restrictions on subsistence fishing have left freezers and smokehouses half-full and hastened a shift away from a tradition of spending summers at fish camps along the river.

“This year, fishing is not really worth it,” said Aloysius Coffee, a commercial fisherman in Marshall who used to support his family and pay for new boats and snow machines with fishing income.

At a kitchen table cluttered with cigarettes and store-bought food, Mr. Coffee said he fished for the less valuable chum salmon this summer but spent all his earnings on permits and gasoline. “You got to sit there and count your checkbook, how much you’re going to spend each day,” he said.

The cause of the weak runs, which began several years ago, remains unclear. But managers of the small king salmon fishery suspect changes in ocean conditions are mostly to blame, and they warn that it may be years before the salmon return to the Yukon River in large numbers.

Salmon are among the most determined of nature’s creatures. Born in fresh water, the fish spend much of their lives in the ocean before fighting their way upriver to spawn and die in the streams of their birth.

While most salmon populations in the lower 48 states have been in trouble for decades, thanks to dam-building and other habitat disruptions, populations in Alaska have generally remained healthy. The state supplies about 40 percent of the world’s wild salmon, and the Marine Stewardship Council has certified Alaska’s salmon fisheries as sustainable. (In the global market, sales of farmed salmon surpassed those of wild salmon in the late 1990s.)

For decades, runs of king, or chinook, salmon — the largest and most valuable of Alaska’s five salmon species — were generally strong and dependable on the Yukon River. But the run crashed in the late 1990s, and the annual migrations upriver have varied widely since then. “You can’t depend on it any more,” said Steve Hayes, who manages the fishery for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Officials with that department and the federal [Fish and Wildlife Service](#), which jointly manage the fishery, say variations in ocean conditions related to climate change or natural cycles are probably the main cause of the weak salmon runs. Certain runs of chinook salmon in California and Oregon have been weak as well in recent years, with ocean conditions also suspected.

In Alaska, fishermen also blame the Bering Sea pollock fishing fleet, which scoops up tens of thousands of king salmon each year as accidental by-catch. The first hard cap on salmon by-catch is supposed to take effect in 2011, but the cap is not tough enough to satisfy Yukon River fishermen.

The Yukon River fishery accounts for a small fraction of the state's commercial salmon harvest. But the fish themselves are considered among the best in the world, prized for the extraordinary amount of fat they put on before migrating from the Bering Sea to spawning grounds in Alaska and Canada, a voyage of 2,000 miles in some cases.

Most commercial fishing is done on the Yukon River delta, where mountains disappear and the river branches into fingers on its way to the sea. Eskimos fish with aluminum skiffs and nets from villages inaccessible by road. Beaches serve as depots and gathering places.

Kwik'Pak Fisheries, in Emmonak, population 794, is one of the few industrial facilities in the region. Forklifts cross muddy streets separating storage buildings, processing facilities and a bunkhouse for employees from surrounding villages.

For decades, almost all commercially caught king salmon were sold to buyers in Japan. But in 2004, Kwik'Pak began marketing the fish domestically, and for a few years fish-lovers in the lower 48 could find Yukon River kings at upscale restaurants and stores.

This year, Kwik'Pak sent just six king salmon to a single buyer in Seattle, and only a trickle of other kings made it to market. Most of those fish were caught incidentally during an opening for fall chum salmon.

Kwik'Pak is promoting chum salmon, also known as keta, and experimenting with an oily whitefish called cisco. But harvests of those fish are limited, and the price paid to fishermen is much less than for kings.

The company, which was formed in 2002 in part to develop local economies, now runs a store selling fishing supplies and hauls gravel in trucks that once carried fish. This summer, employees spent their time repainting the Catholic church.

"We're a one-resource economy down here," said Jack Schultheis, the company's general manager. "We don't have the oil fields or timber or anything else to work on. This is all we've got."

In the 1980s and early 1990s, commercial fishermen on the lower river made an average of \$8,000 to \$12,000 in gross earnings, sometimes more. Since 2000, that number has been closer to \$4,000, and this year, it dropped to just over \$2,000.

"You gotta try to find some other work," said Paul Andrews, a commercial fisherman in Emmonak. "It's

really, really hard out here.”

Like many on the Yukon delta, Mr. Andrews relies on income from fishing to sustain a subsistence lifestyle that also includes hunting for moose, seals and migratory birds.

Arthur Heckman, who manages a small store in the village of Pilot Station, says more and more people are asking him for credit. “Some days I have people call me up and say, ‘I just want a box of crackers,’ or ‘I just want to buy some Pampers,’ ” he said.

The cost of living in remote villages along the river is high, and many residents rely on a mix of part-time work and government aid. Most also rely on fish.

Nets stretch from riverbanks, and fish wheels — large rotating traps built on driftwood rafts — turn in the current near eddies. Simple smokehouses rise from every village beach and fish camp.

King salmon, which can weigh 30 pounds or more, are cut into long strips and dried for weeks over smoking alder or poplar. The candylike strips are ubiquitous here, served always with a sturdy cracker called Pilot Bread. Salmon are also canned, frozen and salted.

This year, fishery managers for the first time closed all subsistence fishing on the first pulse of king salmon and cut fishing times in half on later pulses, leaving many residents with just two 18-hour periods a week to fish.

Zeta Cleaver, one of the only people fishing in the middle-river village of Ruby in late July, said people called her from as far away as Anchorage wanting to buy fish. She used to catch more than a dozen king salmon a day and fill her smokehouse with fish for her children and grandchildren, she said. This year she got only a few kings.

Until recently, many residents gathered with family to fish from remote camps along the river, a holdover from a migratory lifestyle that included summer camps for fishing and winter camps for hunting and trapping.

This year, restrictions on fishing, combined with the high cost of gas and continuing societal shifts, kept many camps empty. A reporter’s 900-mile canoe trip down the Yukon and Tanana Rivers showed countless camps shuttered or abandoned. Multifamily camps that once rivaled nearby villages in population seemed more like quiet retreats from them.

High prices for heating fuel and limited fishing income left many lower-river residents in dire straits last winter and prompted shipments of food and other aid. With this year threatening to be even worse, Alaska’s governor, [Sean Parnell](#), in August sought federal disaster relief for Yukon River residents. The request is still pending.

In Marshall, people are bracing for a long winter. [Heating oil](#) costs more than \$7 a gallon here, and a can of condensed milk sells for nearly \$4. Villagers are going moose-hunting in groups to save on the cost of

gasoline.

“The whole community is kind of hurting,” said Mike Peters, a fisherman and heavy equipment operator. “People really depended on the fish, and it’s not there.”

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