



REDUCING SALMON BYCATCH IN THE POLLOCK FISHERY

Yukon River Salmon & the Pollock Fishery

Yukon River salmon, despite their name, spend a relatively short portion of their lives in the Yukon. Born on the river, they swim downstream as soon as they are strong enough and spend most of their existence in the ocean before returning to the Yukon River to spawn and die.

While commercial and subsistence users wait for the salmon to return to the river to harvest them, many of these salmon – along with salmon from other parts of Alaska, Japan and Russia – are intercepted first by a fishery which doesn't even intend to catch them. The largest fishery in the country, the pollock fishery, pulls 1.1 million metric tons of pollock a year out of the Bering Sea with mid-water trawls. While they intend to catch pollock only, the nets catch whatever is in their path, and thus salmon are caught as well. Because salmon are a prohibited species under the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (the Council) Fisheries Management Plan, the pollock fishery is not allowed to sell these salmon commercially. These unwanted fish are called bycatch and for a long time were simply thrown back into the ocean (dead after spending time in the trawl nets and on deck), now many are donated to food banks. In 2002-2003 the pollock fishery was responsible for 85% of all of the Chinook salmon bycatch caught by the groundfish fishery and 97% of "other salmon" bycatch (on average over 98% of the "other salmon" category is chum).

Some of these salmon are the same salmon whose return we wait for on the Yukon River. In fact, studies indicate that were it not for bycatch from the pollock fishery, 6522 more Chinook would have returned to the Yukon in 1997, 7510 in 1998 and 2721 in 1999.¹ Yukon River salmon returns have diminished over the past years, with Chinook harvests trending downwards since the mid 1990s and chum harvests in 2004 over 60% below the 10-year average (see Fig. 1).

The runs have begun to recover since an incredible low in 2001, with record high returns in 2005. At the same time, bycatch amounts in the pollock fishery have increased dramatically in the past few years (see Fig. 2).

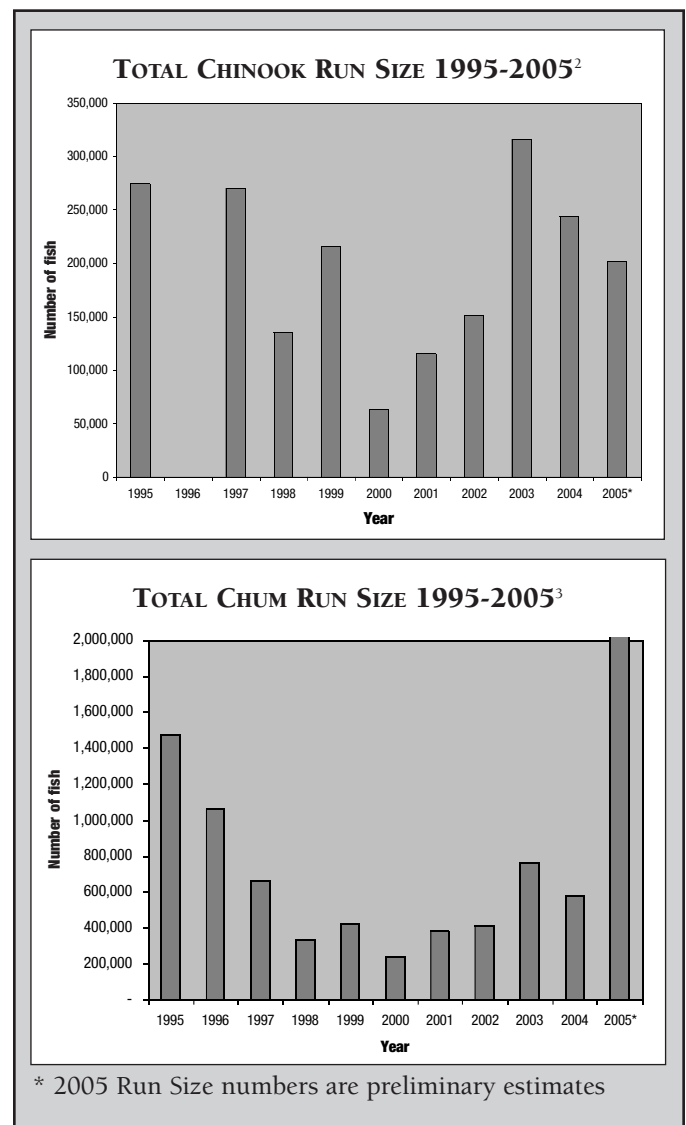


Fig. 1 – Yukon River Salmon returns

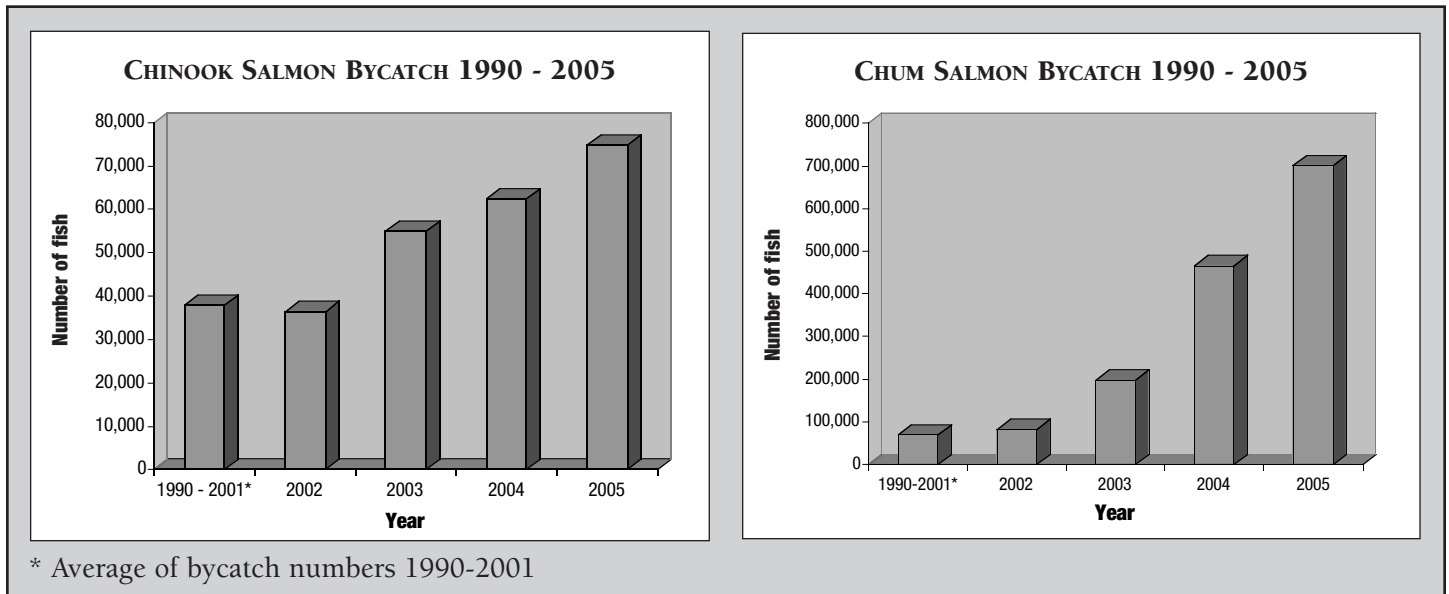


Fig. 2 – Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands Salmon Bycatch⁴

Reducing Bycatch in the Pollock Fishery

Since 1994 the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association (YRDLFA) has been involved in efforts to reduce salmon bycatch in the pollock fishery. Since then bycatch has been controlled through the use of a “Salmon Savings Area” or SSA. Under the current system the savings areas are closed as soon as a trigger amount of fish – 29,000 Chinook and 42,000 Chum (in the Catcher Vessel Operational Area) – are caught.⁵ While this system eliminates bycatch in the designated savings areas by closing them to all pollock fishing, it does nothing to eliminate or even lower bycatch rates in other areas of the Bering Sea fished by the pollock fleet. There is some evidence

that the closures have actually forced pollock boats to fish in waters with higher bycatch rates.

In response to the shortfalls of the savings area system, the pollock fishery has proposed a new method, the Voluntary Rolling Hot Spot System, or VRHS. YRDLFA has been working with pollock fishers, the Council and other Western Alaska groups to design and implement the VRHS. Under this system, which the Council accepted in October, the pollock industry has committed to regulating itself to avoid areas of salmon bycatch in return for eliminating the Salmon Savings areas. Rotating areas are closed on a weekly basis based on real-time data from fishers instead of the fixed closure areas of the existing system.

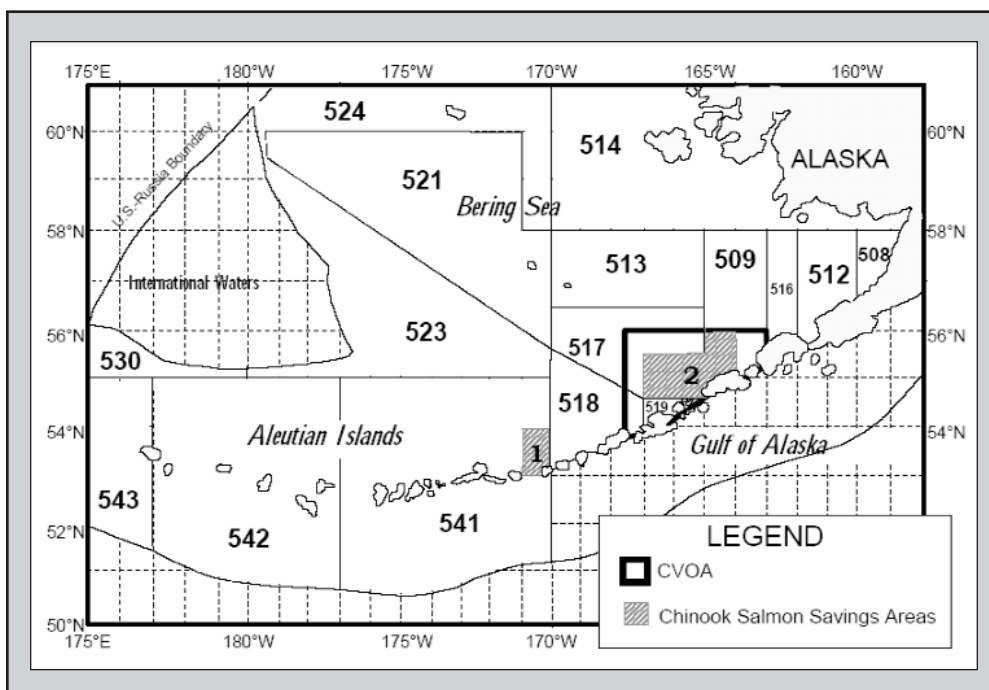


Fig. 3 – Chinook Salmon Savings Area and Catcher Vessel Operational Area (CVOA)⁶

Under the VRHS agreement, signed by the entire pollock fleet with YRDLFA and the Bering Sea Fishermen’s Association (BSFA) as third party members, pollock boats will report their bycatch rates (the number of salmon per metric ton of groundfish) and locations to a central administrator, Sea State, within 24 hours of their catch. Sea State will analyze bycatch rates from the entire fleet and on a weekly basis will issue orders closing areas with high bycatch rates. The pollock fishing season is split into two different seasons – the “A” season, which runs from January 20 until the end of March and the “B” season which runs from June 10 until the end

of October. Because the fishery itself and interactions with salmon are not the same during the two seasons, the VRHS system operates differently in the “A” Season and the “B” Season.

During the “A” Season, areas in which the bycatch exceeds a set rate are closed as savings areas. This set rate is called the “base rate” and is based on bycatch rates from the previous year’s average bycatch rate and adjusted based on bycatch rates at the beginning of the season.⁸ However, the areas are not closed to all pollock boats, only to those with the worst bycatch rates. Closures apply to those with the worst bycatch rates (with bycatch rates over 125% of the base rate) for 7 days at a time, to those with slightly better bycatch rates (75-125% of the base rate) for 4 days at a time and to those with the best bycatch rates (less than 75% of the base rate) the areas are not closed at all. As part of the agreement, along with closures, a “Dirty Dozen” list of the vessels with the worst bycatch rates will be published weekly.

During the “B” Season, the same system of closing areas where bycatch rates exceed a set rate is utilized. In the “B” season, however, the closures apply to all boats regardless of what their bycatch rate is.

Vessels who violate the agreement are fined \$10,000 for the first violation, \$15,000 for the second violation in the same year and \$30,000 for the third violation in the same year.

YR DFA’s role in preventing salmon bycatch

Under the new VRHS system, YR DFA has a unique role to play. As an official third-party member of the Inter Cooperative Agreement formed to administer the system, YR DFA has the right to take legal action to enforce the agreement, both to collect damages and stop fishing where the Agreement has been violated.

While the new system has the potential to reduce bycatch rates and thus increase the number of salmon returning to the Yukon River, the industry-operated system will require careful watch dogging to make sure it is achieving the desired result of reducing salmon bycatch. In addition, while the council has approved the VRHS system, they will still be reviewing back-up systems to have in place in case the

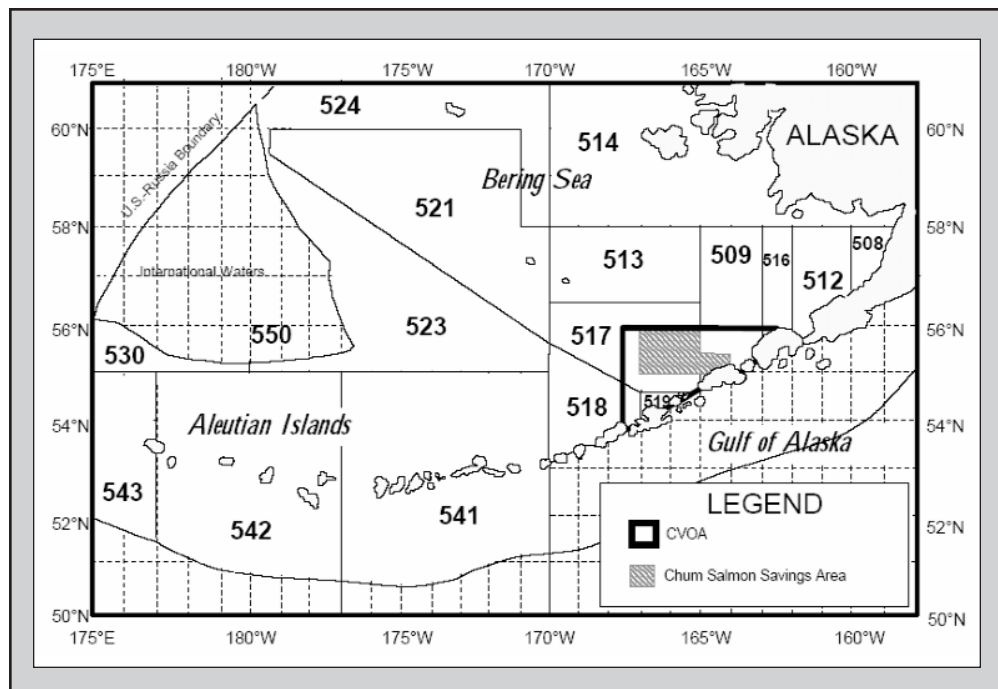


Fig. 4 – Chum Salmon Savings Area and Catcher Vessel Operational Area (CVOA)⁷

VRHS system fails. Further research is also needed to identify the salmon stocks being caught as bycatch so we can better understand the connection between salmon caught as bycatch in the trawl fishery and returns to the Yukon River. YR DFA will be monitoring these developments carefully to ensure that the goals of bycatch reduction and increased salmon returns to the Yukon are met.

- 1 Myers et. al. 2004
- 2 From Proposed Amendment 84 Environmental Assessment/Regulatory Impact Review/Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis for Modifying Existing Chinook and chum salmon savings areas 14 (Aug. 31, 2005) [Hereinafter EA/RIR/IRFA]. Run numbers are based on harvests below Pilot Station and Pilot Station passage index.
- 3 *Id.* at 22.
- 4 From Bering Sea Aleutian Islands Salmon Bycatch, April 2005 Staff Discussion Paper (Item C-5(b)).
- 5 This number includes the CDQ (Community Development Quota) bycatch allotment.
- 6 From EA/RIR/IRFA 9.
- 7 *Id.* at 10.
- 8 Note that while the Chinook rate is set initially based on the previous year’s bycatch experience and then adjusted, the Chum rate is set initially at .19 which is 80% of the 2003 season average. EA/RIR/IRFA 121.

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YUKON RIVER DRAINAGE FISHERIES ASSOCIATION

Promoting Healthy, Wild Salmon Fisheries on the Yukon River

The Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association provides a collective voice for the people of the Yukon River to ensure the long-term sustainability of the river and its cultural and economic benefits.

YR DFA WORKS TO:

- Keep people informed of current fisheries issues, maintain dialogue among Yukon River fishers & solve problems in fisheries management;
- Represent commercial and subsistence fishers in policy forums;
- Sustain wild salmon populations & restore habitat;
- Preserve traditional ways on the Yukon River; and
- Build markets for Wild Yukon River salmon.

For more information about YR DFA's programs, or to become a member, contact us at:

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