



**KWIK'PAK**  
F I S H E R I E S

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**OPENING INCIDENTAL KING SALMON HARVEST A WISE DECISION, KWIK'PAK FISHERIES  
GENERAL MANAGER AND CONSULTING BIOLOGIST ASSERT**

**Emmonak, AK**--With the summer Yukon River king and keta salmon runs now history, Kwik'pak Fisheries ([www.kwikipakfisheries.com](http://www.kwikipakfisheries.com)), the major salmon buyer on the lower Yukon, said that allowing a commercial summer keta fishery to occur "at the tail end" of the king run may have worked well to protect Canada-bound fish, but that it resulted in a disappointing summer keta salmon harvest.

And while the second-guessing may have already begun about the decision made by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) to allow the incidental king harvest, both Kwik'pak's general manager and its consulting biologist assert that ADF&G made a wise, if controversial, decision to open the summer keta fishery.

Kwik'pak General Manager Jack Schultheis credited the ADF&G for its skill in doing a "balancing act" every year to fulfill U.S.-Canada Treaty obligations regarding king salmon. "At the same time," he said, "we need to ask, where does the management of the Canadian-origin salmon stock end? Is it when every last Canadian fish has passed through the lower river, or is there some point where we say that we've done all we can and we are going to start fishing for chum?"

This year, ADF&G opened the keta fishery well past the traditional time needed to maximize the harvest, Schultheis pointed out. As planned, ADF&G allowed three-quarters of the king run to pass through the lower river before opening commercial fishing for keta salmon.

While this management strategy protected a high proportion of Canadian-origin fish from being incidentally taken in the commercial keta fishery, it also allowed three-quarters of the keta to pass before commercial fishing could commence, Schultheis said. "For this reason, fishing on the last quarter of the keta run resulted in very slow fishing and poor harvests. However," Schultheis added, "the summer keta salmon fishery provided much-needed income to one of the poorest areas of the nation." Schultheis said that the keta harvest fell far short of his projected target. "Clearly, ADF&G has to face some tough decisions about whether they should ask the upper

river to voluntarily reduce their subsistence take of king salmon to try to fulfill our Treaty Obligations to Canada, while allowing commercial fishermen to take keta salmon along with relatively small numbers of Canadian-origin king salmon on the lower river,” he said.

“With subsistence being the priority consumptive use, it is easy to see how ADF&G could be conflicted,” he added. However, the vast majority of the 9,000 to 10,000 incidentally caught fish were from Alaskan stocks, which experience less exploitation than the Canadian fish. Additionally, the number of females in the catch was much smaller than in other years —with only 30 percent of the incidental catch being female. He also noted that most of the harvested kings were very small, averaging a mere 12 pounds each, a result of using small mesh gillnets, restricted to 6-inch in this particular fishery.

While some fishermen on the upper river might be concerned about the incidental catch, an analysis of the numbers should provide some reassurance, according to Kwik’pak’s consulting biologist, Gene J. Sandone. Sandone, former AYK (Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim) Regional Supervisor with ADF&G, carefully tracks the run.

Sandone’s observations:

- The vast majority of the 10,000 kings incidentally harvested were small male fish. Only about 750 female salmon were Canadian-origin, adding that “this represents a relatively small removal of the reproductive capacity of the stock.”
- There will be more than enough males on the spawning grounds this year, considering the age-class composition of the run and the associated male-female ratio.
- There are a lot of young fish in the run this year. “Hopefully, their siblings will return in good numbers in the next few years.”
- The summer keta salmon directed fishery will not substantially impact the number of king salmon crossing the border.

According to Sandone, king salmon runs have produced poorly since 1998. Canadian-origin king salmon runs in the 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s averaged nearly 160,000, which translates into Yukon River runs in excess of 300,000 fish.

Since 1998, by contrast, Canadian-origin runs have averaged about 100,000 fish, Sandone said. Recent runs (2007-2009) have averaged fewer than 80,000 fish, suggesting that “this year’s run may be close to that recent average.” This is not due to overfishing, “but a shift in production for the stock for some unknown reason.” Sandone concluded, “Escapements have been adequate to very good, but production from those escapements has been dismal.”