

Food, Nutrition & Science

FROM THE LEMPERT REPORT



Fish Producer



FARMER

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Jack Schultheis, 58, is the General Manager of Kwik'pak Fisheries LLC, a fishery that supplies the market with wild Yukon River Salmon, Bering Cisco (whitefish), and Arctic Lamprey. Looking for work and adventure, Schultheis first came to Alaska in 1971, landed his first job working in the fishing industry for Whitney-Fidalgo Seafoods, and later joined the Kwik'pak Fisheries operation after an inspiring trip to the Yukon.

What makes Kwik'pak Fisheries unique?

The salmon that we catch and process are very high in beneficial Omega-3 fats – among the highest in the world, wild or farmed. Our job is to ensure that our fishermen get the highest economic return for these valuable fish. In addition to buying fish, Kwik'pak Fisheries operates a processing facility in Emmonak, Alaska, employing residents of the local communities, including high school students, through our internship program.



Kwik'pak Fisheries was formed in 2002 to ensure that the fishermen on the Lower Yukon River would always receive fair market value for their fish.

Today, the fishery provides economic security to the six Yupik villages of the Yukon River Delta – where fishing has been a way of life for more than 10,000 years.

What drew you to the Yukon?

Having grown up back East in Pittsburgh, I liked the challenges that Alaska posed – and I still do. Every day brings a new challenge and every challenge is different. For me, it is also gratifying to know that I am, in some small way, helping to develop the economy in the Lower Yukon and move the Yupik people beyond a subsistence economy.

How have your harvesting practices changed over the last 10 years?

The Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) manages our fishery and the biggest change we have seen is that today there are shorter and fewer openings – that is, the time when we are allowed to fish.

Because of better handling techniques, we are now seeing a higher quality fish enter the market. Our fishermen now ice and bleed the fish they catch right out of the nets. This is a change from 10 years ago. This change helps with quality and has resulted in a premium price for the fish, which is extremely important because the Yupik Eskimo families depend on the fish not just for their own subsistence needs but also for economic survival.

The other major development that we have brought about in the last few years is to implement a traceability program through Trace Register, a global food traceability company. Through this program, buyers can enter a trace code into a computer, either at point of purchase or on their home computers. This code allows them to trace the product back to its source. For us, this program is vital to helping ensure that our fishermen receive the highest value for their fish. And it assures buyers they are getting the product they are paying for.

How will fish harvesting evolve in the next five years?

There will be continued focus on quality and handling, especially logistics. Air freight is a fact of life in remote Alaska, and it is a huge cost factor. Because we are in a remote area of the state, it can be tough to get the fish out to, say, New York City. We'll keep working on logistics to move the product more easily.

What is your greatest challenge running a fishery?

Being a wild fishery, there are so many variables that are uncontrollable – the weather, when fish show up, the amount of fish that show up, how many fish have to be allocated to Canada, and so on. The Yukon River itself is a factor. It is five miles across at the mouth, and we are trying to manage the harvest of fish that are ready to swim 2,000 miles.

How do you know what a retailer will want a year from now?

We have good relationships with our customers and talk with them about what to expect and what they need – sometimes a year out. One item we are considering is frozen fillet portioned options. Our customers are always looking for high quality and especially like the high Omega-3s in Yukon River Salmon. This is why we are working with the non-profit Oldways to talk about this more. We go out of our way to educate customers about what we do. Many have visited the Yukon, seen the fishing grounds and the tender boats. They have seen the challenges – what could go right or wrong – and understand why we have to do things the way we do. For instance, if weather comes in, we can't get a plane out to make that delivery. This is the challenge of running a wild fishery.

What steps are you taking toward conservation?

It is important to understand that it is in the culture of the Yupik people to preserve the fishery for future generations. In addition, we work closely with ADF&G to test and maintain the fishery. The Alaska State Constitution mandates that all fisheries be managed sustainably. Also, in Alaska, all natural resources are governed by the citizens. Everyone gets an equal say and everything is discussed and voted on publicly for us by the Board of Fisheries, a citizen board appointed by the governor and confirmed by the legislature.

What kinds of reactions do you get from consumers when they meet you in person?

I was at a Whole Foods in Pittsburgh recently and said to the counter guy, "That's our fish." He was fascinated by the Yukon. People think we are living in igloos with polar bears all around. What consumers should know is that the Yupik people have a long tradition of conservation and of taking care of the resources so their grandchildren and great grandchildren can continue to live the way their ancestors lived.



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