

Alaska Native communities and fisheries are being threatened in many ways including climate change, habitat loss, and federal fisheries management practices that allow waste and excessive harvest. Over the past several years, Alaska Native Tribes have asked the Administration to respond to these challenges of climate change and inequity in federal fisheries management by reducing bycatch, improving science and research, providing for increased participation and representation of underrepresented populations including Tribal entities in regional fishery management councils, and protecting the sustained participation of communities in the fisheries-management process. Below are some selections from letters and testimony to Congress, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and National Marine Fisheries Service.

Excerpts from letters sent to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee in November 2023:

“Chinook and chum salmon numbers have declined precipitously during the past several years. 2021 was the eighth year that Chinook runs were too low to support subsistence fishing needs and the first year that once-abundant chum salmon returns were lower than Chinook runs... And while we are being restricted to the point of being unable to catch a single salmon, the State of Alaska and some federal management agencies are carrying on business as usual... NPFMC is dominated by members who are employed by or are otherwise loyal to large, private commercial fishing interests (many of which are located out-of-state and are in some cases foreign owned). And like the State of Alaska, the U.S. Department of Commerce has done little to protect salmon stocks and, by extension, our communities.” - [Association of Village Council Presidents](#)

“Salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea commercial fisheries, including pollock, has been blamed by many for the demise of salmon fisheries in the Yukon River and throughout coastal western Alaska. There’s a reason for this: as of today, the prohibited species catch of salmon is over 130 thousand salmon, the vast majority of which are chum. While federal staff and NPFMC managers continue to diminish the impact of salmon bycatch in federal fisheries of the Bering Sea, we know that every salmon matters whether it’s in the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea, or attempting to reach spawning grounds in Canada on the Yukon River. Trawlers throw our fish away and keep fishing. While our fisheries are closed. Our smokehouses empty.” - [Tanana Chiefs Conference](#)

“Year after year, our communities are sacrificing our harvests, salmon protein, and time at fish camp—core elements of our traditional ways of life—to protect vulnerable salmon populations and strive to meet spawner escapement goals. Yet we are not seeing similar sacrifices on the part of other fisheries, like Alaska Peninsula (Area M) commercial salmon fisheries and Bering Sea pollock trawl fisheries, that impact the strength of our salmon and, in turn, of our communities... Despite our historical stewardship of salmon and traditional foods in the Bering Sea, our voice has been erased from modern-day marine fishery management; decisions are made without the consent of our sovereign Tribal governments; and we have no appeals process to address this systemic disempowerment and inequity. KRITFC wants to change this regime, and we want to work together to strategize solutions for the long-term survival of AYK salmon and Tribes.” - [Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#)

“Just as Congress and the federal government have shown throughout history their power to remove Tribes from policy solutions, you also have the power to change the course of this disaster by bringing us

to the table. Let our Tribes help the federal government, and one another, to address salmon declines, climate change, and the impacts on our communities. As our Elders tell us, we will all be closer to wellness if we work together.” - [Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#)

“When fish and other nutrient-dense seafoods are not accessible in the region, we are deprived of this culturally significant food that is well known to be the lifeblood of the region.” - [Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation](#)

“Alaska Native peoples have lived and thrived on these lands and managed subsistence resources long before the United States or the State of Alaska existed. Despite this, in recent decades the Alaska Native community has repeatedly been ...forced to fight to ensure the continuation of our ways of life. Those struggles highlight why self determination matters—we want to be the drivers of our own future... In our view, the preeminent challenge before us is fish—the warming of the waters, the movement of fish stocks, the increased competition, and resulting conflicts. It will define our future and that of our country. Fish is not just about food, although fish sustains our people across multiple generations, in nearly every village and community in the State. It is about sustaining our cultural practices and traditions, which includes passing those traditions on to our next generation. The fish crisis has caused unsettling change and has the potential to rip apart our cultural practices and what is most important to us: our family and community relationships. The fish crisis also threatens our relationships with the federal and State governments.” - [Alaska Federation of Natives](#)

“One of the most important Traditional values is to share fish with our Elders and others who are physically unable to provide for themselves. Our Elders tell us that when we shared our catch, we would be fruitful in the years to come and blessed with more fish. Instead, we are experiencing a historic salmon crash. Alaska Natives have borne the brunt of the conservation burden; conservation burdens must also be shared equitably. Our Elders also taught us that the Traditional economies of hunting, fishing, and gathering are our inherent rights as Alaska Natives.” - [Calista Corporation](#)

“By law trawlers are allowed to catch and discard species that are not targeted in their harvest of a species. In this case Pollock. The current system will only recognize that there are fewer fish in the by-catch category because there were fewer fish caught at the time of harvest and not that there are just less fish in the population. If this inability or unwillingness to recognize salmon populations being affected remains the norm, then we will see the by-catch numbers continue to fall until the salmon populations become extinct. And the same will be true of all species of fish caught as by-catch... In times of closure how is it fair that the subsistence user is not allowed to harvest a single salmon, bear the burden of conservation, our river systems cannot meet escapement goals, yet industry is allowed to waste thousands upon thousands of salmon.” - [Kawerak, Inc.](#)

Excerpts from letters to North Pacific Fishery Management Council in April 2024:

“Salmon are a crucial element of our ecosystems, and integral to our cultures, identities, well-being, food security and social relationships. We live in a reciprocal and respectful relationship with salmon. However, our region faces a longrunning multi-species salmon crisis, inclusive of chum salmon.

Reductions in bycatch will have meaningful positive impacts on salmon and our communities.” - [Kawerak, Inc.](#)

“The multi-species salmon declines we are seeing on the Kuskokwim—with the collapse of chum salmon populations on top of Chinook salmon (and coho salmon in 2022)—has pushed our families into a state of insecurity and crisis. How will we heal and nourish our Elders without salmon? How will our babies teethe and develop a taste for fish without dryfish? How will our caribou, moose, berry, and waterfowl populations recover without nutrients from salmon pouring into our land and waters? The anxiety from these questions, the inability to freely fish and practice our fishing traditions to relieve this anxiety, and the sheer lack of salmon—our first food and our lifeblood—can be linked to rising food insecurity, domestic and community crises, mental illness and suicide, and declines in fish camp culture.” - [Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#)

“Tribes in Western and Interior Alaska have been stewards of our ecosystems for millennia, and we continue to hold a sacred stewardship relationship with salmon. However, it appears that NMFS, as the federal government responsible for overseeing this action, is continuing to ignore our Tribes’ voices and misunderstand the gravity of the situation for our people. Our 12,000-year way of life is at stake with the continued depletion of salmon. The resilience of our cultures, diets and health, ecosystems, and economies is faltering without salmon. NMFS has the opportunity—and the authority—to curb one factor affecting it: bycatch in Alaska federal marine fisheries, especially in the Bering Sea pollock trawl fishery. Yet we have not yet seen NMFS take a stand to pursue this opportunity and address our Tribes’ concerns.” - [Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#)

“At its base, fishing provides access to healthy nutrients and fats that help combat food related diseases, such as diabetes, heart disease, and stroke. The act of going to fish camp, preparing camp, fishing, and processing fish is hard, physical activity. From dusk to dawn, families are working. Also, it helps families stay busy and maintain focus in the present moment, which is ideal for mental health. TCC provides healthcare and mental health services to the Interior 42 communities. We are very concerned about the impacts on healthcare and mental health. In fact, TCC is already seeing the lack of healthy nutrients and fats impacting our tribal members. Over the last 10 years, the salmon crisis is likely a contributing factor to the number of diabetic and pre-diabetic patients due to increased food insecurity and lifestyle changes.” - [Tanana Chief Conference](#)

“We request the Council respond with meaningful action to help us in our fight to restore our wild salmon populations and the wellbeing of our communities and people. While we realize that bycatch is only part of the problem we also know reducing it is part of the solution. There are only so many tools at our disposal and a key step would be to allow salmon to pass through key bycatch areas to have a chance at making it to their spawning grounds... It seems the pollock industry continues to pursue maximum production in an unstable environment and uncertain future... The need to fully prosecute the TAC is becoming more unreasonable as markets are unstable, product is held up in frozen storage, and USDA subsidies are needed to realize returns on investment... It is not necessarily the last ten years of bycatch that has caused our salmon declines but it definitely has had a devastating effect as the actions taken to lower bycatch have not been sufficient enough to counteract the cumulative effect of pollock and PSC removals over multiple decades. The salmon issue is a huge problem that requires a management action

significant enough to offset years of damage. We have not been meeting or barely meeting escapement goals for Yukon summer and fall chum. We past 23 years. We have not been able to fish for chinook and chum for nearly 5years now, with the exception of a very small opening for late summer/fall chum in 2023 that was not adequate for subsistence needs. We are asking for a chance to eat.” - [Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#)