

**TESTIMONY OF SAM COTTEN
COMMISSIONER
ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH & GAME**

**ON
THE STATE OF ALASKA SALMON
BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OCEANS, ATMOSPHERE,
FISHERIES, AND COAST GUARD
U.S. SENATE**

OCTOBER 20, 2018

Good morning Senator Sullivan. Thanks for holding this hearing. My name is Sam Cotten and I am the Commissioner of the State of Alaska Department of Fish and Game. We understand and appreciate the role of the United States in salmon management in Alaska. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) oversees fishery management for the Annette Island Reserve. The U.S Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) service has actively managed the Kuskokwim River Chinook salmon subsistence fishery for the past five years. The Department of Commerce, through the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC), sets salmon bycatch limits in federal fisheries. The Department of Commerce and State of Alaska are responsible for approval and ratification of the Pacific Salmon Treaty. The Department of Commerce determines, and the United States Congress considers, funding for fishery disasters in our state.

In addition, Alaska's participation on the NPFMC is very important and we are thankful we have been able to maintain our voting majority. The Council is currently addressing a recent Ninth Circuit decision that has taken away state salmon management in three areas that Alaska has managed since statehood. We believe the court got it wrong and have suggested changes in federal law that would return the authority to Alaska.

We work with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on several fronts including ocean survey work that is important to both governments. Stable funding of these projects is important. I believe we have a very good working relationship with NMFS at both the regional and national levels. One area of particular concern is with the observer program and its limitations due to funding constraints. The observer program has been improved but does not enjoy the level of federal support seen in other regions of the United States. Observer coverage is important for several reasons. In Alaska we are especially concerned with salmon bycatch in federal fisheries.

Alaska salmon fisheries have experienced wild variations in recent years. This year, Bristol Bay sockeye salmon set records as the largest run in history with the greatest value. Bering Sea systems generally were outstanding, with the exception of Chinook salmon. The Gulf of Alaska saw very poor runs and, in some cases—Chignik in particular, there was no commercial harvest.

Pink salmon returns typically vary on odd/even-year cycles. In the past decade those variations have set records for highs and lows. We are all painfully aware of the extremely poor returns of Chinook salmon throughout the state.

Salmon are extremely important to Alaska's people. In the past four years I have traveled throughout the state, meeting with people in all regions to hear concerns, complaints and ideas about our salmon and its management.

Alaska's constitution requires managing fisheries under the sustained yield principle. For salmon, we do that using scientifically based escapement goals to insure a sufficient number of spawning fish are available to produce future generations. We use our regulatory and permitting framework to protect freshwater salmon habitat.

Alaska prioritizes subsistence use and supports all uses of salmon: commercial, personal use, sport and guided sport. In upper Cook Inlet, managing fisheries for all users is a major challenge. At least half of the state's population lives nearby. Traditional sport and commercial fishermen have been participants for many decades. The sport fish industry; guides, lodges, charter and other businesses that benefit from this important economic sector have grown. The personal use dipnet fisheries are relatively new, very popular (30,000 permits) and an important source of fish for people from all parts of Alaska. Many people enjoy fishing opportunities in the Mat-Su and pay close attention to the management practices of the department and the allocation decisions of the Board of Fisheries (BOF). Gov. Walker has created the Cook Inlet Salmon Task Force in an effort to get all users to talk to each other rather than about each other. We are hopeful the participants who represent all groups can find some common ground and make recommendations to the governor and the Board of Fisheries.

Historically, Alaska has seen challenges that we have overcome. Federal management of salmon when Alaska was a territory was a failure by all accounts. With statehood Alaska took over management and rebuilt our runs. Foreign fleets were able to intercept salmon before they reached our river systems; thanks to the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Act, also known as the 200-mile limit, we have stopped that assault.

Those were political solutions that were appropriate and successful. Today's problems are not political. They require better science, more information, more data and more collaborative approaches. Alaska occupies the center of the Pacific salmon range and Alaskans feel the effect when changes happen within that environment. For this reason, we are working with a wide range of local, national and international partners with an interest in salmon including the federal government, the University of Alaska and other universities, partners from all sectors of Alaska's fishing participants, the North Pacific Research Board (NPRB), the NPFMC, and the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission. 2019 is being designated as the Year of the Salmon. We

hope to capitalize on this occasion. We expect there to be many new opportunities to pursue answers and solutions to the questions that surround the state of the salmon.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game is the largest science organization in Alaska. We look forward to advancing the best science available to insure the long-term health and sustainability of our most important natural resource.