Some Thoughts on 
Fishery Management in Alaska

Phil Smith
Alaska Young Fishermen's Summit
Anchorage, Alaska • January 2007
We will discuss . . .

- Some history
- Some politics
- Some economics
- Some sociology
- Some inspiring moments, and
- Some challenges
Some History . . .

• Fish, and salmon in particular, were essential to aboriginal Alaskans
  - Nutritional well-being
  - Cultural coherence
  - Religious practices
  - Social cohesion
• Settlements were largely determined by access to resources
Drying Subsistence Fish
Some More History . . .

• Alaska Native “methods and means” were highly selective and quite efficient
• Exploitation of major food fish occurred in short seasons, leaving time to develop highly sophisticated cultural and artistic traditions
• Gear was varied, including hook and line, nets, traps, spears, etc.
Halibut Hook - Southeast Alaska

Heath Ives - Alaska State Museum
Some More History . . .

• Strong private property rights were accorded to land and resources at the tribal and clan level, and were inherited

• Trade and barter among and between groups allowed for distribution

• Resources seen as essential part of natural environment and were protected to insure returns
Some More History . . .

- European arrival did not significantly impact fishery resources, but
  - Reduced fur-bearing marine mammal populations (and aboriginal populations because of disease and exploitation)
- Salmon not easily exploited because no effective way to preserve it
- Canning developed in 1860s, and first Alaska canneries established in SE Alaska in 1878
THE ALASKA SALMON PACK.

PORTLAND, OREGON, Sept. 14.—Reports from Alaska, just received, give the salmon pack at 371,000 cases. In view of the fact that three weeks ago the pack was considered nil, this is a good showing. The salmon did not begin to run until the fall rains began. The season is about over, so that there will be very few more fish packed—not enough to materially alter the above figures.

The New York Times
Copyright © The New York Times
Originally published September 15, 1889
Compared with . . .

~2,000,000 cases in 1900
~3,000,000 cases in 1910
~4,800,000 cases in 1920
~5,500,000 cases in 1930
~6,500,000 cases in 1940
~3,600,000 cases in 1950
~2,500,000 cases in 1960
Some More History . . .

• After purchase of Alaska in 1867, Alaska was a customs district under the Department of the Treasury
  - Supervision of fishery remained there until 1903, when Congress created the Bureau of Fisheries in the Commerce Department

• A scientific fish commission was also established, but engaged only in research
Some More History . . .

- In 1889, congress passed a law prohibiting barricading of streams
  - But no enforcement until 1892, when 2 people were authorized
- 1896 Act reduced fishing in streams above tidewater
  - But Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet and Bristol Bay were exempt from weekly closed periods
River Fish Trap
Chilkoot River, 1894
Some More History . . .

- 1903 Act put management in Commerce Department
  - Not seen as a regulatory agency
  - Major clientele was American business
- A 1906 Act to give specific authority to Secretary was vigorously opposed by cannery interests
  - And so was weakened to the point that it could not provide effective controls to meet conservation goals
Cannery at Loring (near Ketchikan), c. 1897
Some More History . . .

- Weakening of the 1906 Act underscored political power of canneries
  - Which insured that even the weaker provisions would not be enforced
- And resulted in close cooperation between the regulators (Department of Commerce) and the regulated (canneries)
Some More History . . .

• The 1912 Organic Act provided Territorial status and a Territorial Legislature for Alaska
  - Early version provided for Territorial control of the fisheries, which was common in American history, but
  - Industry lobbied and the bill was amended to bar the Territory from any control over its fisheries
The fish trap

- Highly efficient
- Highly destructive
- Highly controversial
Brailing the catch from a fish trap
Some More History . . .

• As Alaska’s population grew with a stable year-round work force, the controversy over fish traps heated up
  - Most Alaskans simply wanted them banned, but
  - Industry fought back, successfully

• By 1920, serious problems existed
  - Lower run amounts
  - Market failure from end of WWI
Some More History . . .

• Vast reserves were then created to “limit entry” into the fishery to existing canneries
  - Very controversial
• An attempt to codify the reserve system was defeated and a compromise (the White Act) passed
• It provided for conservation and
  - “No exclusive right of fisheries...”
Hoover defends Himself and the Reservation system.
Some More History . . .

• White Act provisions included
  - Greater Secretarial power to regulate the fishery
  - A goal of 50% escapement of salmon
  - “No exclusive right of fisheries…”
• The immediate effect was to revoke the reservation policy
• And fish traps remained legal
Some More History . . .

- White Act set the tone for Federal management up to Statehood
  - Fish traps allowed
  - Salmon pack declined from high of almost 7,000,000 cases in the mid-1930s, to low of ~2,500,000 cases by end of 1950s
Sailboats on the way to Bristol Bay

Naknek, 1948
Pulling Gear
Bristol Bay disaster 1953

ALASKA AIRLIFT IS SET
Supplies Will Be Run to Needy Salmon Fishers

BATTLE CREEK, Mich., Jan. 28 (UP)—The Alaskan Command has ordered an airlift to fly food and supplies from Government surplus stocks to 1,800 families in southwest Alaska.

In announcing this today the Federal Civil Defense Administration said that families in the area bounded by Bristol Bay on the Bering Sea to the North and Kodiak to the South had experienced hardships in 1953 and last year because of poor salmon fishing. The F. C. D. A. headquarters are here.
"Let Us Now End American Colonialism"

Senator Ernest Gruening and President Truman
Delegates to the Alaska Constitutional Convention
November 1955 – February 1956
Some More History...

- Constitutional convention debated resources Article (VIII) extensively
  - Issues of resource use, management and allocation
    - Ban fish traps?
  - Issue of structure of Board(s) of fish/game
    - Separate boards?
    - Board of Commercial Fish and Board of Recreational Fishing and Game?
    - Other options
Some More History . . .

- Convention delegates decided
  - To establish that resources are reserved to the people for common use
  - To manage for sustained yield
  - To prohibit creation of any special right of fishery
  - To refer the fish trap question to the voters when constitution voted on
  - To defer structure of fish and game management bodie(s) to the Legislature
Ordinance No. 3 - Abolition of Fish Traps

Section 1. Ballot

Each elector who offers to vote upon the ratification of the constitution may, upon the same ballot, vote on a third proposition, which shall be as follows:

"Shall Ordinance Number Three of the Alaska Constitutional Convention, prohibiting the use of fish traps for the taking of salmon for commercial purposes in the coastal waters of the State, be adopted?"

Yes [   ]    No [   ]

Certified as Passed:
April 24, 1956
Some More History . . .

- Congress passed the Alaska Statehood Act in July 1958
- President Eisenhower signed the Statehood Proclamation on January 3, 1959
- Secretary Seaton banned fish traps in the spring of 1959
- The State assumed management of Fish and Game in January 1960
Some More History . . .

On January 1 of this year, Alaska’s Department of Fish and Game was handed the depleted remnants of what was once a rich and prolific fishery. From a peak of three-quarters of a billion pounds in 1936, production dropped in 1959 to its lowest in 60 years. On these ruins of a once-great resource, the Department must rebuild . . . The livelihood of thousands of fishermen and very existence of many communities scattered along thousands of miles of continental and island coastline depends upon improvement of the fisheries. To this end we will give our best efforts.

Governor William A. Egan
State of the State Address: January 1960
Some More History . . .

Clarence Anderson called his biologists together and laid down the law: "Gentlemen the Governor has informed me of his support, any needed, to return our salmon runs to their former abundance regardless of the pain inflicted on our people. So I call you here today to charge you with filling our streams with spawning salmon. If your actions result in a substantial over escapement, thus depriving our fishermen of their livelihood, you can expect to be criticized but on a more personal level if you allow an under escapement you can expect to be fired."

As told by Clement V. Tillion, 2002
Next Steps . . .

- Very distinguished speakers to address
  - Alaska’s management system and how to access and influence it
  - Alaska’s limited entry system
  - The Federal management system and how to access and influence it
  - The Federal limited entry systems
"For this presentation on the history of fishery management in Alaska, Phil Smith acknowledges his debt to the written contributions of former Senator Ernest Gruening, attorney/historian Donald C. Mitchell, and various others. In particular, Mr. Smith has relied on the work of Richard A. Cooley [author of “Politics and Conservation,” a seminal 1963 study of Alaska salmon policy], as the primary source of the historical information presented. Of course, Mr. Smith acknowledges ownership of any errors in fact or interpretation!"