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Proposed Special Action on 2026 Kuskokwim River Salmon Management (TSA 03-KSCS-26-01): Closure in select drainages and gear restrictions June 1, 2026 – July 31, 2026

PROPOSED BY:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge Manager

REGULATION: 36 CFR 242.27(e)(4)(ii) and 43 CFR 51.242. 27(e)(4)(ii) are amended to read:

*(A) Unless re-opened by the YDNWR Manager, the following Federal public waters of the Kuskokwim River within and adjacent to the exterior boundaries of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge are closed to the use of gillnets and the harvest of Chinook and Chum salmon by all users from June 01, 2026 at 12:01 a.m. to July 31, 2026 at 11:59 p.m. (**see maps in Appendix 1**):*

(1) The Kuskokwim River mainstem.

(2) The Eek River.

(3) The Kwethluk River drainage beginning at its confluence with Kuskokuak Slough.

(4) The Kasigluk and Kisaralik River drainages including Old Kuskokuak Slough to ADF&G regulatory markers at the confluence of Old Kuskokuak Slough and Kuskokuak Slough.

(5) The Tuluksak River drainage including its confluence with the Kuskokwim River and downstream approximately 1-mile to ADF&G regulatory markers.

(6) The Aniak River drainage within the Yukon Delta NWR boundary (on the Aniak River, starting about 500 yards upstream of the Aniak / Kuskokwim rivers confluence up stream to near the Aniak / Buckstock rivers confluence).

(7) The Aniak box defined as: The waters of the Kuskokwim River mainstem from the Yukon Delta NWR boundary at Aniak downstream to a line formed from the northwest corner of the runway (see map in Appendix 1; latitude 61° 35' 16" N, longitude 159° 33' 28" W), due north to a point on the southeast corner of the sandbar (latitude 61° 35' 37" N, longitude 159° 33' 16" W).

(B) Fishing from tributaries not listed above is restricted to fishing 100 yards upriver from the mouth of the tributary (confluence with the mainstem Kuskokwim River).

(C) For non-federally qualified users: The use of gillnets and the retention of Chinook and Chum salmon is not allowed. The retention of Sockeye salmon, Coho salmon, and other non-salmon species utilizing means and methods other than a gillnet are allowed as defined under the State of Alaska fishing regulations (beach seines must meet the definition in (E) below).

(D) For federally qualified subsistence users: Dip nets, beach seines (see (E) below), fish wheels, and rod and reel will remain open throughout the closure and retention of all salmon (and other non-salmon species) is allowed within the mainstem of the Kuskokwim River. Retention of Chinook and Chum salmon within the tributaries is not allowed. Sockeye salmon, Coho salmon, and non-salmon species can be retained within the tributaries. Gillnet opportunities within the mainstem Kuskokwim River may be announced.

(E) Beach seines are defined as non-monofilament webbing, 50 fathoms in length, 100 meshes in depth, and no greater than three and one-half inches stretched webbing.

JUSTIFICATION:

Chinook Salmon

Since 2010, the Kuskokwim River Chinook Salmon population has remained in a pattern of low productivity and Federal in-season management has occurred consecutively since 2014. Average escapement during 2010–2025 was 41% lower than during 1995–2009, the years prior to the recent decline. The 2025 total return estimate of 161,295 Chinook Salmon was 35% lower than the average return during 1995–2009, indicating that the population remains depressed. Restrictions are likely necessary in 2026 to meet escapement goals for the purpose of stock rebuilding for continued population viability and continuing future subsistence uses.

The 2026 Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) forecast is for a total Kuskokwim River Chinook Salmon run between 128,000 and 200,000 fish. The forecast approach utilizes the prior-year run size as the subsequent-year projection bounded by the uncertainty observed in the previous seven years of estimated returns (Larson 2026). This preseason uncertainty requires cautious management of the 2026 Chinook Salmon run.

During this extended period of depressed Chinook Salmon runs, in-season Federal management since 2014 has provided some fishing opportunities for Chinook Salmon to federally qualified subsistence users while also achieving the ADF&G drainage-wide escapement goal (**Figure 1**). Due to low abundance of Chinook Salmon and the need to restrict harvest to meet escapement, the ADF&G amount reasonably necessary to meet subsistence (ANS) has not been met since 2011. (**Figure 2**). Likewise, harvest by federally qualified subsistence users has not been sufficient to meet their needs.

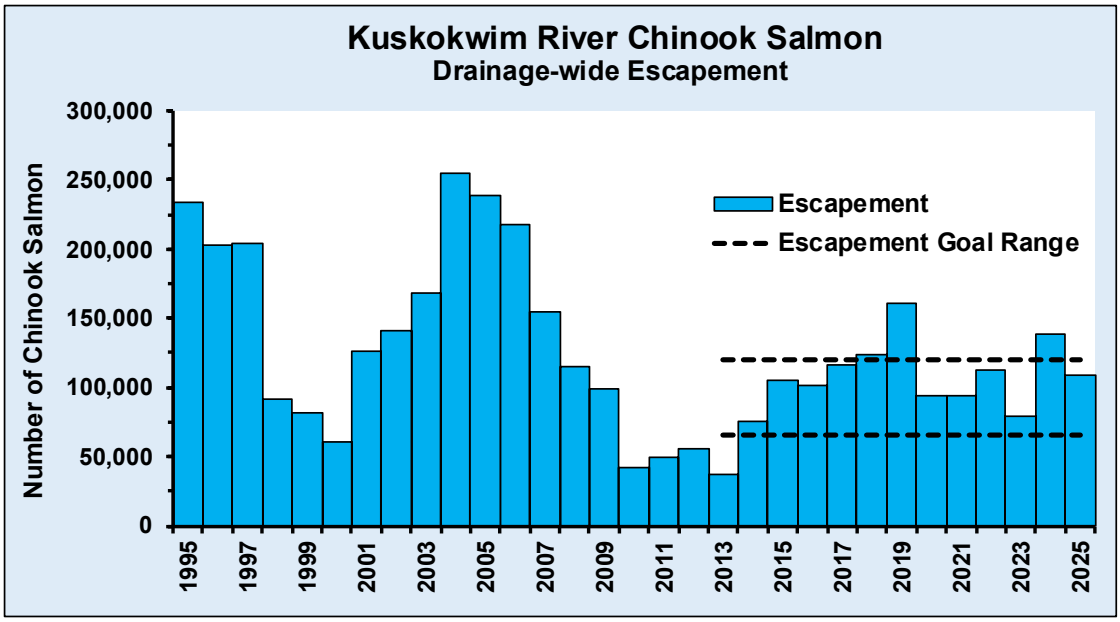

Figure 1: Drainage-wide spawning escapement of Chinook Salmon, Kuskokwim River, 1995–2025. Source: Larson (2026).

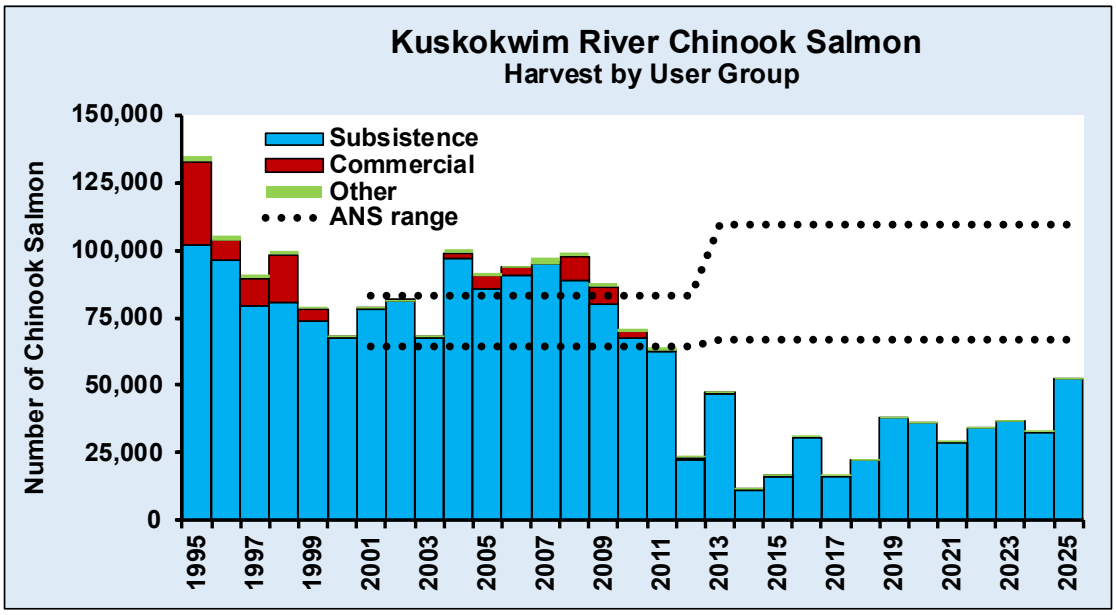

Figure 2: Chinook Salmon harvest by user group, Kuskokwim River, 1995–2025. Source: Larson (2026).

Given uncertain times with persistent salmon declines and a high subsistence need of Chinook Salmon, it is prudent to aim for the upper end of the ADF&G escapement goal for the following reasons:

- Over 90% of Chinook Salmon harvest occurs within the YDNWR boundary. Therefore, managing for the upper end of the escapement goal is necessary to ensure that

subsistence users upstream of the YDNWR have reasonable opportunities to harvest salmon.

- Chinook Salmon spawners are now significantly smaller. Multiple studies have found long-term declines in the returns of older (larger) Chinook Salmon across Alaska and a decline in size-at-age for fish in the ocean (Lewis et al. 2015; Ohlberger et al. 2018, 2019, 2024; Oke et al. 2020; Feddern et al. 2024). An independent expert panel that reviewed declines in the size and reproductive potential of Arctic-Yukon-Kuskokwim region Chinook Salmon found a 40% decline in average total reproductive potential of Kuskokwim River Chinook Salmon over the period 1976–2018 (Ohlberger et al. 2019; 2024). To compensate for this documented long-term decline in the size of returning adult Chinook Salmon and the size of their offspring that return in the next generation, we know that additional spawners must be allowed to escape to spawn to sustain fisheries, allow rebuilding, and buffer against environmental and ecological variability.

- Aiming for the upper end of the ADF&G escapement goal range ensures meeting the established ADF&G sustainable drainage-wide Chinook Salmon escapement goal of 65,000 to 120,000 salmon. Both the Kuskokwim River Sonar Project and the Community-Based Harvest Monitoring Program Data provide crucial in-season information. However, it is a challenge to aim for a specific goal given the variation in the sonar data produced coupled with the unpredictable harvest rates and changes in run timing from year-to-year to meet an objective. Therefore, aiming for the upper end of the escapement goal reduces the likelihood of overharvesting and increases the likelihood of meeting the escapement goal.

Chum Salmon

Due to the depressed Chum salmon population over the last six years, we anticipate that restrictions will be necessary in 2026 to meet established tributary escapement goals within the Kuskokwim River drainage. Federal management for Chum salmon has occurred each year since 2022.

- In 2025, Chum salmon numbers were lower than the previous two years and still well below historic harvests and returns (**Figures 3** and **4**). The 2025 end-of-season passage at the Kuskokwim River sonar was 159,622 fish and the pre-collapse numbers in 2018 and 2019 were 556,000 and 385,000 Chum salmon, respectively, in years with incomplete sonar seasons.

- The long-term need for Chum salmon, as measured by ADF&G ANS, has not been met since 2019 (**Figure 4**). Likewise, harvest by federally qualified subsistence users has not been sufficient to meet their needs.

- Over 90% of Chum salmon harvest occurs within the YDNWR boundary. Therefore, management actions will consider both escapement and the needs of subsistence users upstream of the YDNWR.

- As evidence of the severity of the multiyear decline of Kuskokwim River and other Western Alaska Chum salmon stocks, in 2026 both the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and the Alaska Board of Fisheries took action on regulations to reduce the marine bycatch and interception of Kuskokwim River and other Western Alaska Chum salmon.

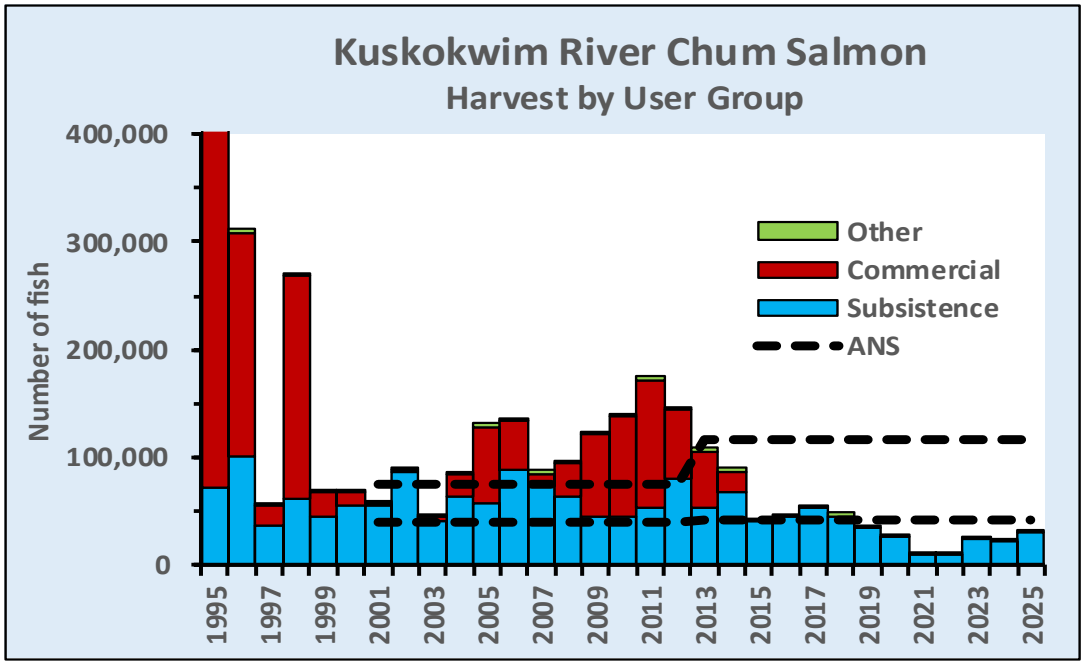

Figure 3: Chum salmon harvest by user group on the Kuskokwim River, 1995–2025. Source: ADF&G AYK Database Management System (https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/CF_R3/external/sites/aykdbms_website/Default.aspx)

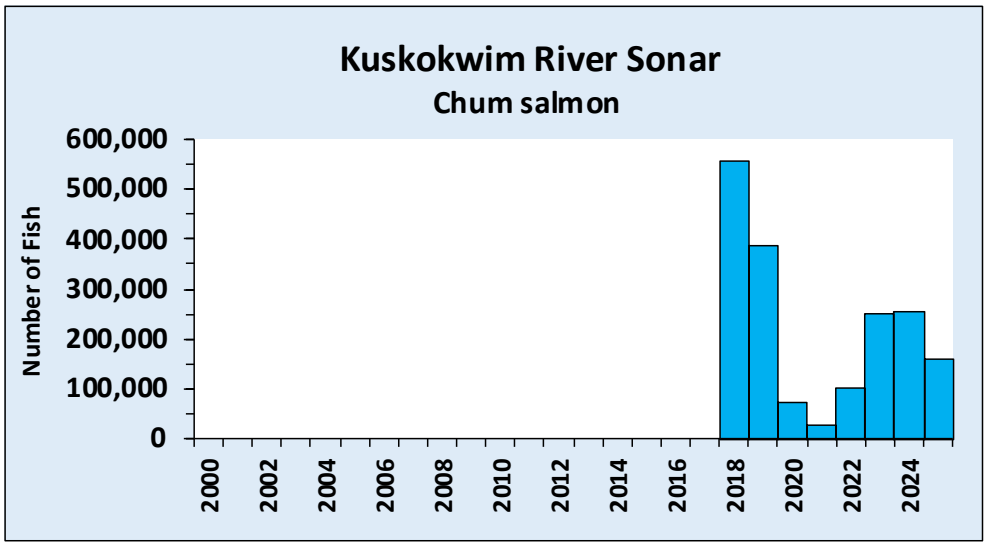

Figure 4: Chum salmon passage at the Kuskokwim River sonar. Source: ADF&G AYK Database Management System (https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/CF_R3/external/sites/aykdbms_website/Default.aspx)

Additional Considerations

Chinook and Chum salmon conservation requires careful mixed-species management. Chinook Salmon cannot be managed in isolation from the declined Chum salmon run. From mid-June to mid-July, the run timing of Chinook and Chum salmon shows significant overlap (**Figure 5**). Harvest openings during the last portion of the Chinook Salmon run can significantly impact the first half of the Chum salmon run, a stock which remains declined.

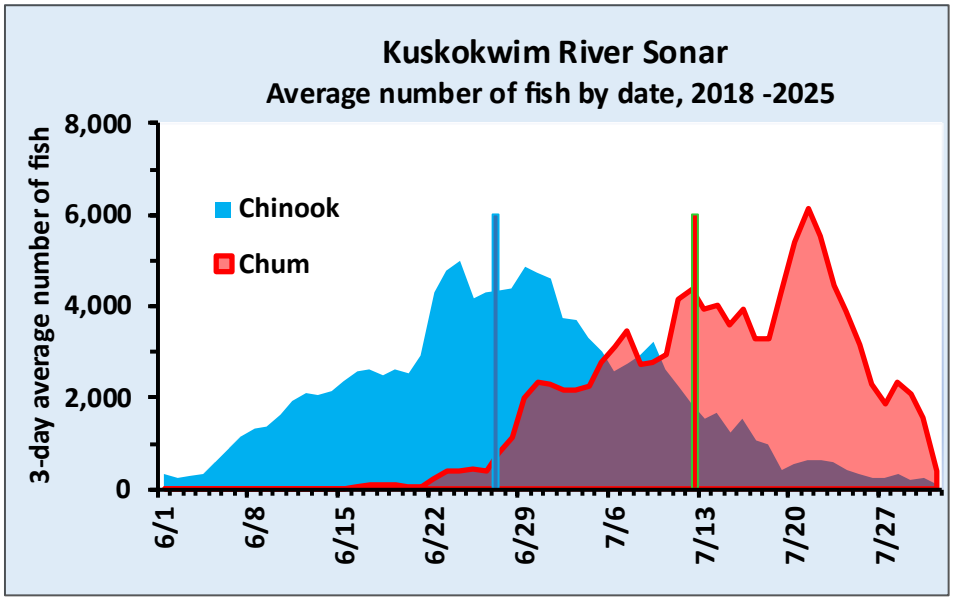

Figure 5: Average run timing for Chinook and Chum salmon passing the Kuskokwim River sonar, 2018-2025. Vertical bars represent the 50% dates of run passage. Source: ADF&G AYK Database Management System (https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/CF_R3/external/sites/aykdbms_website/Default.aspx)

Harvest restrictions within Federal waters are necessary to ensure that discrete stocks of Chinook and Chum salmon are not overharvested. The Kuskokwim River Chinook and Chum salmon stocks are composed of numerous tributary populations. Harvest opportunities spread across the timing of salmon runs reduce the risk of overharvesting discrete spawning population within the watershed, particularly in headwater tributaries.

Restricting the use of gillnets during June through July is intended to conserve Chinook and Chum salmon and it is recognized that abundant Sockeye salmon overlap with Chinook and Chum salmon runs.

Alternative gear types including dip nets, beach seines, fish wheels, and rod and reel are intended to allow people to catch abundant Sockeye salmon during the gillnet closure. Federally qualified

subsistence users that retain all salmon species using these methods are expected to have minimal impact.

Although there are concerns over Coho salmon numbers in recent years, this proposed Temporary Special Action does not include Coho salmon management at this time. Coho salmon numbers will be monitored to determine run strength and the need for conservation measures in-season.

In summary, the 2026 Kuskokwim River Chinook and Chum salmon runs are anticipated to be too low to meet both long-term subsistence needs and dependably meet sustainable escapement goals necessary for stock rebuilding to assure the continued viability of the population. Restrictions, and prioritizing rural subsistence users, are anticipated to be essential to conservation-based management that balances trade-offs between subsistence needs and assuring the continued viability of Chinook and Chum salmon stocks.

Literature Cited:

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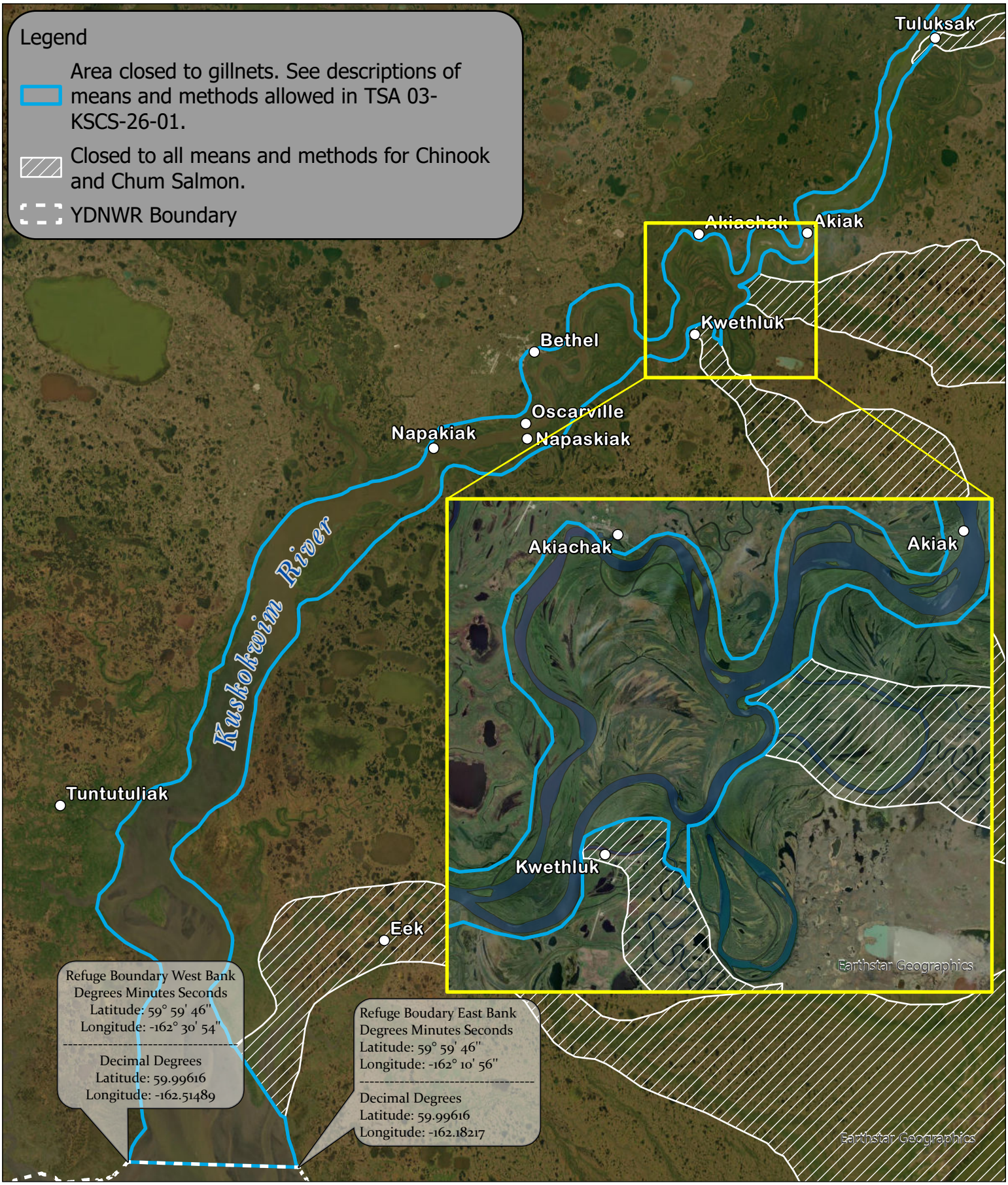
Appendix 1. Lower River Fishing and Closure Area



N W E S

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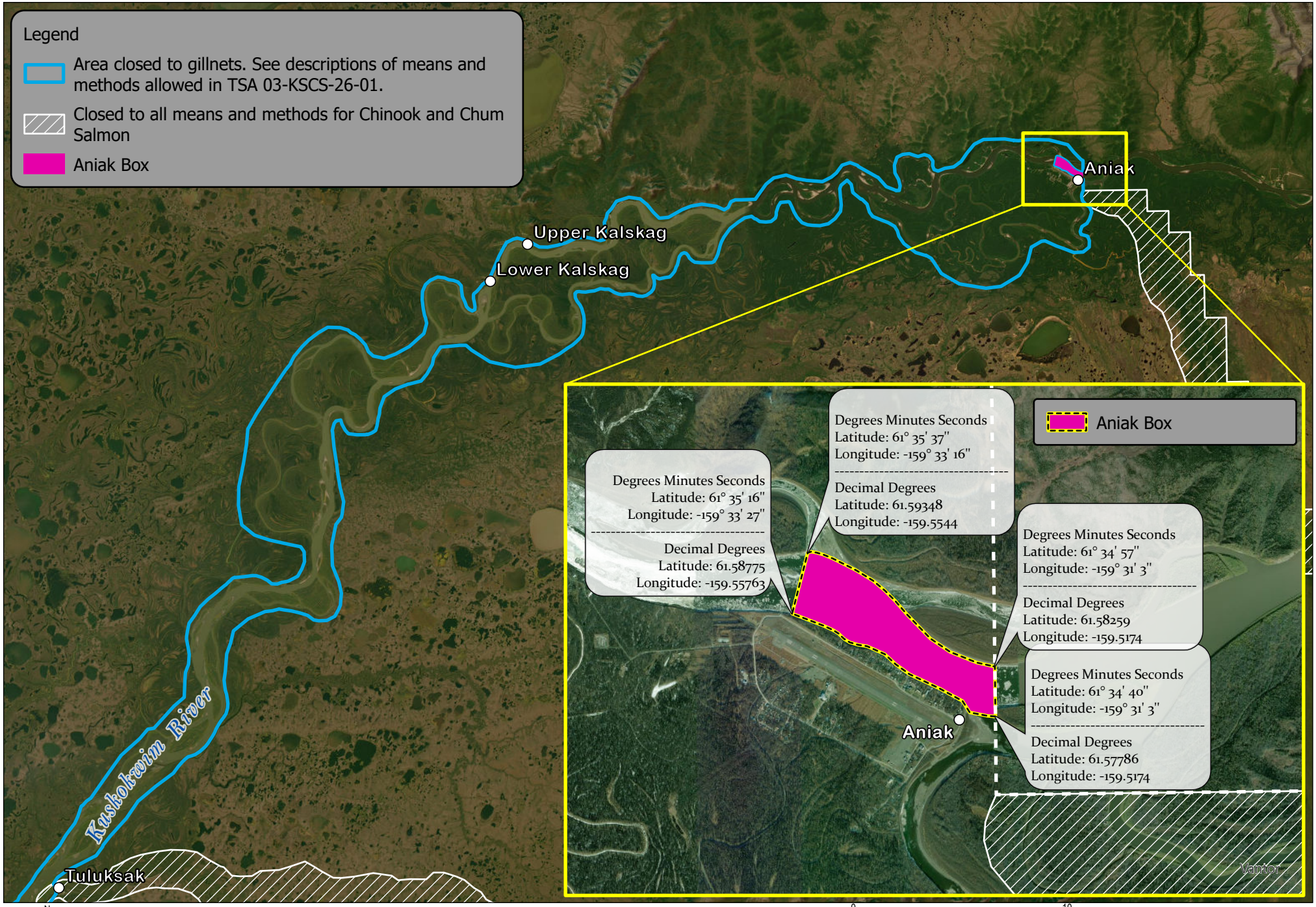
Appendix 1. Middle River Fishing and Closure Area



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