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By MARK KAELKE (/mark-kaelke)

King salmon population a major concern

Several factors play some role in current king salmon declines

It appears Alaska is in the midst of a perfect storm where declines in king salmon are concerned.

Trying to keep abreast of all the various theories as to why these declines are occurring is a difficult task but a sampling of the ones I've heard includes: increased predation from increased populations of marine mammals; increased competition for food due to an over-

fisheries, especially Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries; hooking mortality of juvenile king salmon in sport and troll fisheries; reduced production of wild king salmon fry due to documented reductions of average-size and fecundity of adult king salmon; changes in the timing and abundance of the marine food web brought about by warming ocean temperatures and broader climate impacts; increased smolt mortality in the near-shore marine environment.

I think it's highly likely all these factors play at least some role in current king salmon declines and that's where the perfect storm analogy comes into play. The Department of Fish and Game has recently done an admirable job of making some tough decisions that address and restrict the harvest of king salmon but given the record low levels of king returns projected, it's abundantly clear we all need to pitch in and do more to assist in the areas where we can have an impact.

At this point, every fish could truly make a difference in whether we have fishable populations of kings, or king salmon at all, in the future. In light of that, the use of barbless, baitless hooks, not netting kings and not removing them from the water or better yet, not targeting king salmon at all, are worthwhile prices to pay and are ways sport, charter and troll fishermen can help immediately.

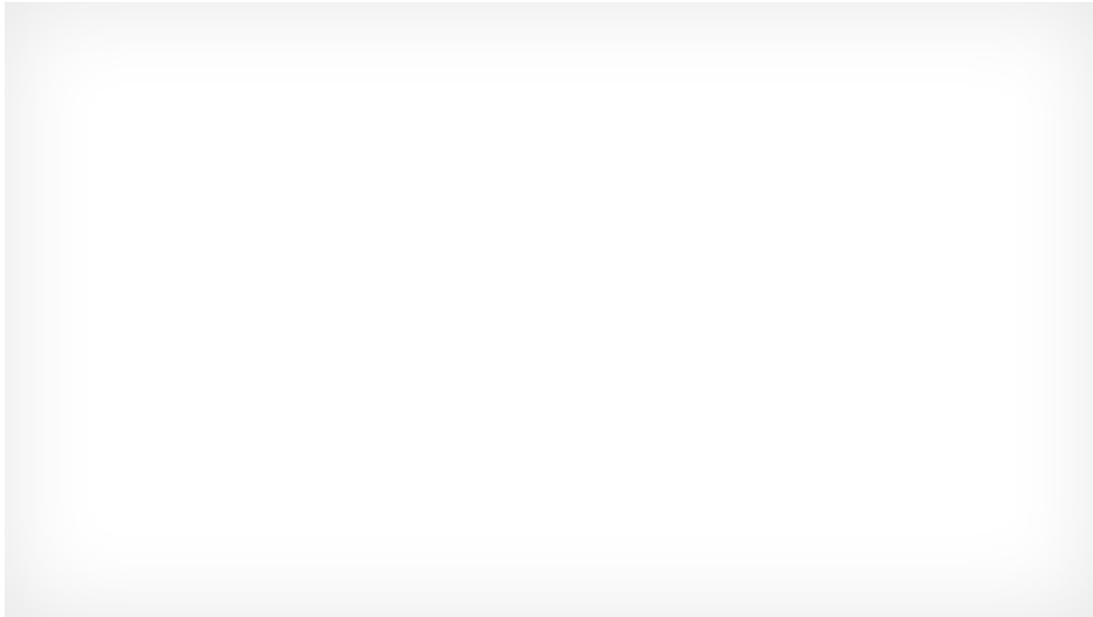
Hatchery and fisheries managers can play a role by scrutinizing and addressing potential over-production and by-catch. Gillnetters can do their best to release kings unharmed back to the water and purse seiners can brail kings out of their nets before bringing them on board. Federal agencies and Native organizations can look at means for addressing the impacts of marine mammal populations. We can all support efforts to rein in B.C. mining in the Taku, Stikine and Unuk watersheds where roughly 80 percent of king salmon are produced in Southeast Alaska. And lastly, our legislators can support funding for more studies and management.

The first step to getting out of a crisis is realizing you're in one and there's no doubt we're in a serious one now where kings are concerned. Getting out of it won't happen by battling over allocation, blaming past management decisions, doing nothing or by putting our pocketbooks or freezers ahead of what's right for the fish.

It won't be easy, fun or quick and frankly the situation sucks, but we, and that means everyone who catches, eats or cares about king salmon, are in it together and we all need to be doing all we can for king salmon for the long-term.

- Mark Kaelke is a 30-year resident of Juneau, former charter and fly fishing business owner, avid sport fisherman and is employed by Trout Unlimited.

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Barbless hooks are a no brainer. We have been utilizing them for years in both the commercial and sport fisheries in BC and it has minimal, if any, impact on catch rates. Sure makes it easier to release the small ones unharmed as well.

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