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## NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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# C3 Cook Inlet Salmon

February 2026

## Action Memo

Council Staff: Dr. Diana Stram

Other Presenters: Dr. Lukas DeFilippo (AFSC), Dr. Richard Brenner (NOAA), Gretchen Harrington (NOAA), Doug Duncan (NOAA)

### Action Required:

1. Review the 2026 Preliminary Salmon Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for the Salmon Fisheries of the Cook Inlet Exclusive Economic Zone Area (SAFE).
2. Approve the SAFE
3. Recommend Final 2026 harvest specifications including:
  - a. The tier level for each stock and the appropriate buffer;
  - b. Overfishing Level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for all stocks as recommended by the SSC;
  - c. 2025 overfished/overfishing status in relation to status determination criteria; and
  - d. Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for each species.

## BACKGROUND

At this meeting, the Council will review and approve the 2026 Preliminary Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for the Salmon Fisheries of the Cook Inlet Exclusive Economic Zone Area; and make final recommendations on the 2026 harvest specifications for each of the salmon stocks. Once NMFS receives the SSC and Council recommendations, NMFS will publish proposed and final harvest specifications in the Federal Register.

## SAFE Report

This is the third Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report for the Federal salmon fishery in the Cook Inlet Area exclusive economic zone (CI EEZ). This CI SAFE provides the necessary information for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to assess the status of the salmon stocks harvested in the CI EEZ during the 2025 CI EEZ salmon fishery and recommend status determination criteria (SDC), buffers, and the resulting acceptable biological catch (ABC) for the 2026 fishing season.

Under the terms of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the National Standard 1 Guidelines (50 CFR 600.310), and amendment 16 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Salmon Fisheries in the EEZ off Alaska (Salmon FMP), this SAFE uses the tier system and harvest specifications process described in the Salmon FMP to calculate SDC and recommend ABC. As allowed by the Salmon FMP and National Standard Guidelines, this SAFE incorporates changes to assessment methods that were recommended by the SSC during 2025, as well as a modeling workshop that convened in 2025 (Section 2.1). The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) prepared this SAFE as part of the process to federally manage the salmon fisheries in the CI EEZ.

Proposed harvest specifications for the 2025 CI EEZ salmon fishery were published on April 4, 2025 (90 FR 14771); NMFS received 11 public comment letters on the proposed harvest specifications before the end of the comment period on May 5, 2025. Public comments pertaining to the 2025 CI SAFE were responded to in the final 2025 harvest specifications published on June 17, 2025 (90 FR 25508). The 2025 salmon fishing season in the CI EEZ began on June 19, 2025, and closed by regulation on August 15, 2025.

### OFLs, ABCs, TACs

The NOAA SAFE Team 2026 recommendations to the SSC and Council are included in the Executive Summary of the SAFE report and are as follows:

Stock	Tier	MFMT	MSST	OFL	OFL <sub>PRE</sub>	Buffer	ABC/ACL
Kenai River Late-Run Sockeye (KNSOCK)**	1	0.265	3,030,000	NA	1,284,478	53.9%	591,509
Kasilof Sockeye (KASOCK)**	1	0.538	555,000	NA	617,006	41.2%	362,866
Aggregate "Other" Sockeye (AOSOCK)	3	NA	NA*	906,757	181,351	15%	154,149
Aggregate Chinook (ACHIN)	3	NA	45,000	2,237	373	30%	261
Aggregate Coho (COHO)	3	NA	NA*	268,053	67,013	75%	16,753
Aggregate Chum (CHUM)	3	NA	NA	390,030	97,508	20%	78,006
Aggregate Pink (even-year) (PINK-EVEN)	3	NA	NA	282,813	141,406	10%	127,266

\*While the minimum stock size threshold (MSST) may be used to assess overfished status for these stocks, determining MSST for 2026 will depend on the availability/number of indicator stocks with escapement data and thus cannot be reliably determined as a preseason quantity

\*\* Maximum fishing mortality threshold (MFMT), pre-season OFL (OFL<sub>PRE</sub>), and ABC were calculated using preliminary sport and personal use harvest estimates. Final values will be presented in future CI SAFE reports pending finalized data from ADF&G.

In addition to recommending appropriate Tier levels and OFLs for all stocks, the SSC can recommend alternative buffers for establishing the ABC. The buffers refer to the difference between the OFL and the ABC. An assessment of the status determination for these stocks in relation to overfished criteria for 2025 is also contained in the SAFE report and will be presented by staff in conjunction with the 2026 proposed specifications.

This 2026 SAFE report contains discussion of the approach used for establishing potential yield for Tier 1 stocks, which is the basis for SDC and the resulting harvest specifications. For the 2026 SAFE, based on a recommendation from the SSC,  $S_{MSY-POINT}$  (the point estimate of the number of spawners to result in maximum sustainable yield) was used for calculating potential yield (potential yield = available CI EEZ harvest after the achievement of spawning escapement at  $S_{MSY-POINT}$ , and, harvests that are likely to occur outside of the CI EEZ), which, in turn, is the basis for SDC (including the OFL<sub>PRE</sub>) and the resulting harvest specifications.

The NMFS SAFE Team recommended SDC and harvest specifications based on sources of uncertainty and the biological attributes of the species being assessed; however, additional sources of uncertainty were not factored into the 2026 SAFE recommendations, including the inability to confirm historical estimates of salmon harvests in the CI EEZ prior to 2024 (which are a substantial basis for the 2024-2026 recommendations); the level of participation in the EEZ salmon fishery prior to 2024; the spatial distribution of fishing effort within the CI EEZ prior to 2024 and effects of that effort on harvests of weaker stocks (Chinook and coho salmon in particular); and harvests and harvest rates for individual stocks and species given the new management structure of having both State of Alaska (State) and Federal salmon fisheries in CI. To the extent practicable, the NMFS SAFE Team aims to incorporate additional sources of uncertainty and include risk tables (see Appendix A) into future assessments and welcomes input on assumptions, estimates, and analyses used in this 2026 SAFE. Within this 2026 SAFE, the NMFS SAFE Team has prioritized and implemented the vast majority of SSC recommendations following their review of the 2025 assessment including the incorporation of socio-economic information on the fishery and intends to implement remaining SSC recommendations and make other improvements on the CI EEZ during future years.

The Council can consider additional adjustments to species-level TACs including buffers to account for the harvest of weak salmon stocks, bycatch considerations, management uncertainty, ecosystem requirements, or social and economic considerations.

**Environmental Assessment:**

Also posted to the Council's eAgenda is the Environmental Assessment (EA) for setting the Cook Inlet harvest specifications. This NEPA document is used to support the proposed and final harvest specifications. There is no requirement for an RIR because harvest specifications are not rulemaking. An initial and final regulatory flexibility analysis (IRFA/FRFA) are provided with the proposed and final rule documents.