

FISH RAP

Change Service Requested

Highlighting releases, returns, policy and legislation affecting the Southeast Alaska salmon fisheries

Vol 44 No. 1
June 2026



F/V Aurie G hauling in their net.

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NSRAA works to increase opportunities for fleets

NSRAA’s management and board worked together to craft a plan for what it hopes will be a simpler and more successful cost recovery plan.

After three years of cost recovery operations where the organization was unable to meet its financial goal, this year it is aiming to collect \$6.9 million through a full closure at Crawfish Inlet and Southeast Cove and board-specified closure dates for Deep Inlet.

NSRAA continues to work toward implementing a tax assessment at Hidden Falls. A tax assessment would make up for any shortfall during cost recovery operations and also allow the organization to minimize its closures and offer more fishing time to the fleets, while still collecting the funds it needs to operate.

As of early May, NSRAA’s application for a tax assessment was still under review by the Alaska Department of Law.

“Whether that will be done (and approved) in time for this season, is very uncertain,” says NSRAA General Manager, Scott Wagner. “It’s still possible, but looking less likely that it will be approved for the 2026 season.”

If approved, the tax assessment would impose a 25 percent tax on common property chum salmon harvested in the Hidden Falls terminal harvest area and the surrounding district.

The tax would be collected by the state during the sale of the fish to the processor.

“It’s similar to the salmon enhancement tax,” Scott explains. “That’s a 3 percent tax fishermen pay. This would be an additional 25 percent tax.”

Any taxes collected by the state during the 2026 season, for example,

would then be paid to NSRAA in 2027. The board would then determine how to use those funds for the 2027 season.

“So, it could minimize closures next year,” he says.

How much NSRAA would receive from the taxes collected would depend on the price of the fish at the time of the tax.

While the tax assessment is not necessarily a popular option among the fleets, it would allow NSRAA to minimize its cost recovery closures and allow fleets more room to spread out.

“We’ve done it before,” Scott explains. There was a tax assessment at Hidden Falls for six years until the salmon returns there dropped so precipitously that it didn’t make sense to continue implementing the tax. “When it was working, it was working great. We didn’t have to put out bids or close it for cost recovery.”

Now that the Hidden Falls returns have strengthened again, the board agreed it wanted to try using the assessment tax in order to increase fishing opportunities for the fleets. Since it seems unlikely NSRAA’s request for the tax assessment will be approved in time for this season, however, the board decided at its spring meeting to get a loan as a cushion to ensure there would be ample fishing opportunities for the fleets.

Ben Adams, NSRAA’s Research and Evaluation Manager, is hopeful this year’s cost recovery plan will not only allow the fleets more fishing time, but that cost recovery operations will be more efficient.

“We might get through the Deep Inlet cost recovery in four weeks,” he says. “We’ll close until it reopens.”

General Manager's Notes



This past May, fishermen in Southeast Alaska and across the Gulf received some good news: NOAA finished its 12-month scientific review to not list Chinook Salmon in the Gulf of Alaska as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This review was triggered by a petition filed with NOAA, by the Wild Fish Conservancy (WFC) – the same group that sued NOAA regarding the Pacific Salmon Treaty and its 2019 biological opinion and incidental take of ESA-listed Chinook in the Southeast Alaska Chinook salmon commercial troll fishery. Both issues threatened the Southeast Alaska Chinook salmon commercial troll fishery, the net gear fisheries and sport fisheries. Now that these issues have been resolved, commercial fishermen can breathe a little easier and, for the first time in many years, trollers don't have to worry about a mid-season shutdown. A copy of NOAA's May 12, 2026 decision to not list Gulf of Alaska Chinook as threatened or endangered may be found on the front page of our website.

Along with that good news, fishermen in Southeast Alaska will see significantly better prices this season for chum and pink salmon. Prices have returned to historical highs for both species, – a welcome relief after three years of depressed prices. The increased value means more NSRAA fish will be available for common property fishermen this season. Although NSRAA's total chum forecast for 2026 is just under 3 million, improved prices mean roughly 70% of the returning chum should go to common property fisheries, based upon our pre-season forecast.

We will have a couple of return milestones for fish returning to our Hidden Falls Hatchery this year. The first return of Keta River Chinook salmon will return to Hidden Falls. While this will just be Age-3, 1-ocean adults, we are optimistic that as we get multiple age-class returns, we will be able to begin taking Keta River broodstock at the hatchery in 2027. Additionally, we will have the first return (3-year-olds) of chum salmon released in Takatz. This release site was dormant from 2016 to 2023. In 2023, NSRAA partnered with Armstrong Keta Inc, (Port Armstrong Hatchery) to produce up to 40 million of their permitted chum salmon for release in Takatz, bringing the Hidden Falls release numbers back to where they were before Takatz releases were discontinued. This should also add to common property harvest in the Hidden Falls Terminal Harvest Area.

NSRAA's cost recovery plan for 2026 includes the full chum return to Southeast Cove and Crawfish Inlet. Both sites have a poor forecast with no planned openings for common property. The remainder of our 2026 cost recovery needs will come from Deep Inlet, beginning with a closure at the end of stat week 26 (June 27th) and will remain closed until cost recovery is complete. The good news is that with this year's improved prices, we will need fewer fish to meet our cost recovery goal, which will minimize the closure time.

Scott Wagner

2026 SCHOLARSHIP
RECIPIENTS

Addison Presciandaro
Emmit Johnson

Medvejie begins vibrio
immunization trial

The staff at NSRAA's Medvejie Hatchery is experimenting with a new method of protecting its chum from loss due to the vibrio bacteria.

Like any virus or bacteria, vibrio can lead to substantial losses in a hatchery setting, due to the high density of fish during rearing, compared to those in the open ocean. It is possible to vaccinate the fish against vibrio by mixing the immunization into their feed or by submerging them in an immunization bath.

Though NSRAA staff has used the immersion method to vaccinate its Chinook, it has previously used the feed method for its chum, even though the immersion bath is likely more effective.

Why the different treatments?

Because Chinook are reared longer before they are released into the ocean, they spend more time in freshwater tanks before being moved to net pens in salt water.

"They are already in freshwater containers, where we can control water quality and other factors that we're not able to do in the ocean," explains Medvejie Hatchery manager, Jared Nelson. "It takes much less equipment and personnel to dip the fish that are in freshwater tanks than those in salt water."

To use the immersion method for chum would require that the staff do so once the fish had been transferred to saltwater net pens, which is why it has previously used the feed method. But while the feed method can be effective, there is no way to ensure that each fish gets a prescribed amount of the immunization.

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Northern Southeast Regional Aquaculture Association

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Hidden Falls hydroelectric plant to be replaced

NSRAA has begun the process to replace the hydroelectric plant at its Hidden Falls Hatchery. The hatchery's current hydroelectric plant was installed shortly after the facility was built, in 1984.

"We've gotten quite a few years of good service out of it," says Kenny Gray, NSRAA Maintenance Manager. "Things are starting to wear out and it's not feasible to replace them."

NSRAA staff looked into refurbishing, rather than replacing, the current plant, but the cost savings was minimal and came with a fairly high risk, if there were a failure.

The hydroelectric plant generates 250 kilowatts of power, which powers the entire remote site – hatchery and housing, included. While the hatchery does have another, smaller, hydroelectric plant for emergencies, that one can only generate 87 kw of power. The backup generator requires 15 -20 gallons of diesel per hour, the cost of which adds up quickly.

"If the diesel generator goes down, we've got nothing," Kenny explains. "The consequences would be drastic."

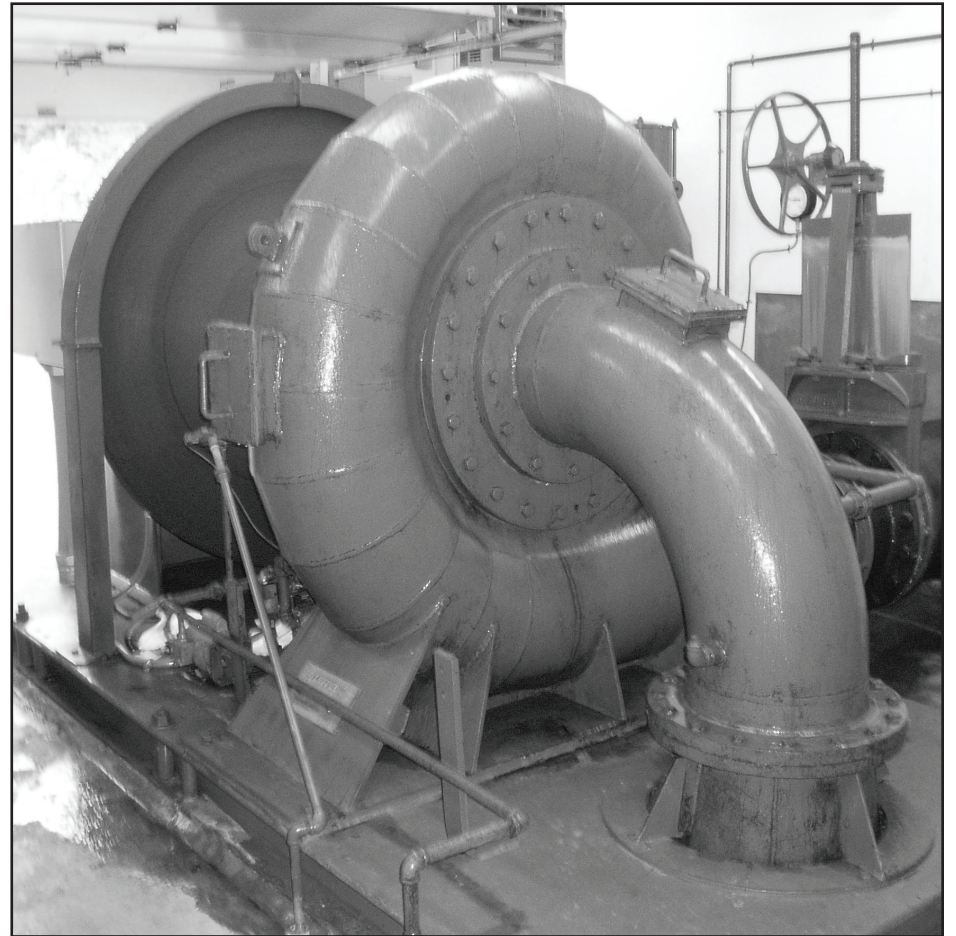
The new hydroelectric order required a lead time of about one year. Kenny hopes it will arrive in time for the hatchery staff to remove the old plant and install the new one in the spring of 2027, before the busy season begins. It will take an estimated two weeks to complete the work.

The new station will be more efficient than its predecessor and utilize less water to generate power. The water used to generate power comes from a lake and is then directed into the hatchery for fish rearing. Lake levels vary from year to year.

"The lake level is our bank," Kenny explains.

The timing of the expense of a new hydroelectric plant is not ideal, after three years in which NSRAA has been unable to reach its cost recovery goals.

"The board's support on this project has been great," he says, "especially during this difficult financial climate."



Current turbine in Hidden Falls' hydroelectric plant

Sawmill Creek awaits approval for increased coho broodstock release

For several years, NSRAA has been unable to collect enough broodstock for its coho program at the Sawmill Creek hatchery, due to a combination of high interception rates and low marine survivals. The staff has a new strategy it hopes will solve the problem: increasing the number of coho it releases as broodstock from Medvejie Hatchery, which will require approval from the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

NSRAA is permitted to collect 4.3 million coho eggs for its Sawmill Creek coho program. All adult coho returning to Bear Cove are intended for broodstock, but not enough fish are making it back to Medvejie for NSRAA staff to collect the eggs it needs to meet its goals.

Interception rates for the coho returning to Bear Cove have averaged 72 over the history of the program, peaking as high as 82 percent on a few occasions. Typically, if NSRAA is unable to collect enough broodstock there, the staff will go to Deep Inlet as a backup. But not only does collecting coho from Deep Inlet and transporting them to Medvejie require a substantial increase in staff effort and result in additional wear and tear on the equipment, but it is also hard on the fish and results in higher mortality rates before spawning.

Despite going to great efforts to collect broodstock from alternative locations, NSRAA still has been unable to meet its eggtake goals for several years now.

"(Remote collections are) never a preferred or easy alternative," says NSRAA Operations Manager, Adam Olson.

Each year that NSRAA is unable to collect the permitted number of eggs for its coho program (or any of its programs, for that matter) it results in fewer fish released into the ocean and less returning for the fleets, prompting the search for a better solution.

"Assuming trends remain consistent (high interception and marine survivals around 4 percent), the increased release of coho broodstock from Medvejie should produce adequate returns for us to meet the eggtake goals and alleviate the need for collecting backup broodstock from Deep Inlet," he explains.

NSRAA submitted a request to alter its permit in order to increase its release of coho for broodstock for its Sawmill Creek program. The increased release does not require an increase in production, but would simply mean that NSRAA would transfer the extra coho from Sawmill Creek to Medvejie Hatchery.

The request was reviewed and unanimously approved for recommendation by the Regional Planning Team at its April meeting. It is now awaiting approval by the Commissioner.

According to Adam, approval is not urgent. The next opportunity for an increased broodstock release at Medvejie will occur in the spring of 2027.

If approved, the first brood year of the nearly doubled broodstock release would begin to return in 2028. It would take a few years to determine if this new strategy allows NSRAA to collect enough broodstock from Bear Cove without having to go to remote sites as backup.

Increased 2026 prices could make up for mediocre returns

Though forecasts for NSRAA's salmon returns this season are not especially strong, prices may be on the rebound.

"Overall, it's going to be a much better season, hopefully, for the fishermen, just due to the increase in prices," says NSRAA General Manager, Scott Wagner.

Every spring, the staff and board at NSRAA, like anyone whose livelihood is dependent on the catch, look ahead to the salmon season with the hope that fish will return in healthy numbers and prices will be strong. After three consecutive difficult seasons, that hope now comes with a thick layer of caution. But if this year's cost recovery bids are any indication, the season holds promise.

"The last three years have been a real struggle," Scott says. "The prices just have not been there."

This year's forecast of 2.7 million chum is on the lower side of the historic average, but upward trend in prices could help make up for a weaker showing.

Salmon forecasts have become increasingly difficult and undependable over the past decade. The recent unpredictability of age class structures has rendered traditional forecasting methods obsolete.

Salmon returns have trended younger, with a higher ratio of three-year-olds, and smaller, so the average number of fish no longer translates similarly in pounds.

Ben Adams, NSRAA's Research and Evaluation Manager, who is

in charge of reviewing data every year to forecast each season's returns, works diligently in an effort to ensure the forecasts are as informed as possible, but the recent volatility in ocean survivals and age structures comes with a larger degree of uncertainty.

"The total chum forecast for 2026 ranges from 1.5 million to 4 million," Ben explains. "So, this run still has the potential to be above average. If that happens, with the increase in prices, it would be stellar."

That said, Ben is not overly optimistic that the returns will come in higher than predicted. The return of three-year-olds was very weak last year, especially those at Hidden Falls, Southeast Cove and Gunnuk Creek.

"When you see that, it rarely translates to a good run of four-year-olds," he says. "It could indicate an age shift (back to more) four-year-olds, but the data we're looking at doesn't corroborate that. We're assuming this was poor marine survival for that brood year, whether that was a result of rearing or ocean conditions or both."

According to the forecast, Deep Inlet and Medvejie should see the largest portion of this year's returns – approximately 1.8 million.

Ideally, the salmon will return above forecasts, but even the runs come in at the current forecast, an increase in fish prices could make the difference between a poor season and a good one.

"Things are looking better," Scott says. "It's much more optimistic for fishermen."

Research & Evaluation team offers critical insight

What was once NSRAA's evaluation department – which focused on data analysis and forecast, with Chip Blair as the only full-time staff member – has grown and evolved in to what's now known as the Research and Evaluation Department.

"The research was a new addition in 2021, but the department as a whole has grown exponentially since 2015," says Ben Adams, NSRAA Research and Evaluations Manager, who heads a team of four full-time staff, plus some part-time employees.

The additional employees, plus an investment in research and lab equipment, allows the organization the resources necessary to analyze and better understand more than 40 years of data, as well as to implement research projects which can help NSRAA's management and board make better and more informed decisions.

The team not only records and analyzes data from incubation, rearing, releases and returns, but also collects, records and analyzes data from otolith samples, fish scales and more.

"We collect tens of thousands of otolith samples and scales every year," Ben explains. "It is a large-scale undertaking."

NSRAA staff has collected a plethora of data over the past four decades, but it has been increasingly difficult to find the staff time outside of field work and forecasting to do deeper analyses on that data to gain a better understanding of larger trends.

That insight "is critical to the success of our programs," Ben says. "The information we get from analyses, we use for long-term planning."

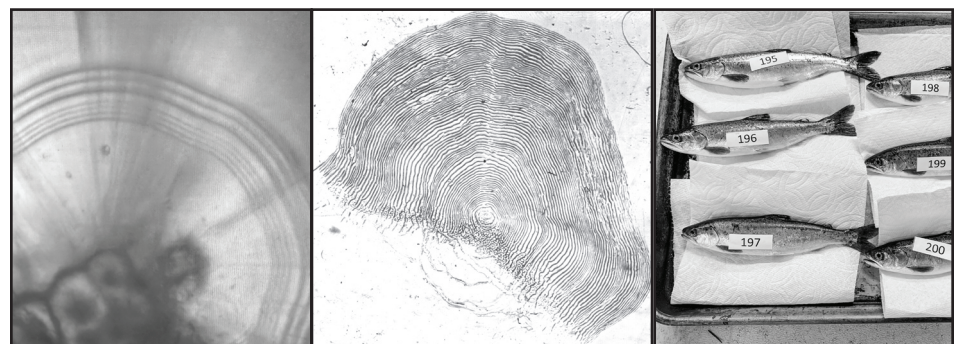
That data can provide an understanding of changing trends among fish survival and returns which can, in turn, help Ben as he forecasts returns each season, for example, or guide the NSRAA managers as they determine whether a particular rearing strategy or cost recovery plan is most successful.

Now that the team has the manpower it needs, NSRAA is able to expand its research. That means multiple new and improved projects, such as trialing different rearing strategies to decrease the cost of Chinook production, studies of outmigration behavior to better understand and adapt to optimal release strategies, and fish scale analyses, which offer insight on age of return patterns.

"The more information we collect and the more insight we gain, the more we can refine our procedures and improve how we raise and release our fish," Ben says. "We're not conducting research for its own sake. We're collecting information to better understand how these factors affect the quality of our programs and whether we need to adjust course."

This year, Ben and some of his team joined the management at the Board of Fisheries, the American Fisheries Society and other industry meetings. The data NSRAA has collected over its history can offer valuable insight to other organizations and leaders in the industry.

"We are trying to raise awareness about what we do," he explains. "We do more than just release fish. The data we collect is especially valuable because we are a stable entity – we're not relying on funding cycles. We have long-term data that is relevant to a lot of other fisheries and policymakers in Alaska."



Left - image of an adult hatchery chum otolith

Middle - image of an adult chum scale

Right - Medvejie fall release zero-checks prepped for gonadosomatic index sampling, to measure what percent of population are precocious males (mini jacks)

Little Port Walter research facility closed

NSRAA works to continue development of Chinook for production

Little Port Walter, Alaska's oldest year-round biological research station, has officially closed – ending an era of critical research on Pacific salmon and other marine organisms and biological and environmental monitoring in Southeast Alaska.

The facility, which has operated under NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, is almost 100 years old. Not only does the closure end the research conducted there, but it also jeopardizes the future of the Keta River Chinook stock, a program in which NSRAA has been heavily invested with the goal of eventually producing the stock for the fleets.

Researchers at Little Port Walter Station (LPW) began collecting eggs from a wild stock of Chinook from the Keta River, near Ketchikan, more than ten years ago. Research focused on the wild stock's natural tendency to go to sea after only one year. NOAA's goal with this research was two-phased: first, to establish the hatchery stock at LPW, and second, to transfer it to Alaska's private, nonprofit hatcheries for production for the fleets.

The stock has been of particular interest to NSRAA, as it has the potential for the organization to produce more Chinook at a lower cost. Chinook are the most expensive species of salmon to raise in hatchery environment because they are traditionally reared in a hatchery for 18-24 months before being released as yearlings. (By comparison, other species are reared for less than a year.)

The zero-check strategy can reduce Chinook production costs by shortening rearing time by 9-12 months. The shortened rearing time can cut production costs by nearly 50 percent – but it's only worthwhile if the salmon's marine survival isn't substantially compromised in the process.

NSRAA has followed the Keta Chinook research in hopes the stock could eventually be produced for the fleets. In 2021, after NOAA announced it would close Little Port Walter due to budget cuts, NSRAA scrambled to partner with NOAA and the staff at the research facility in order to continue work on the Keta River broodstock. The goal was to eventually transfer it to NSRAA's Hidden Falls Hatchery.

Since then, NSRAA and staff at Little Port Walter have worked together to continue the Keta broodstock program. Staff from both organizations collected eggs from the salmon returning to the research facility, at which point NSRAA staff transferred the eggs to and reared them at Hidden Falls. The fry were then transferred back to Little Port Walter for release each spring.

The Keta Chinook have done well so far, increasing in numbers until the project entered its second phase and NSRAA was able to take the surplus eggs to conduct its own research and release a small amount of fish for the fleets from Hidden Falls in 2025. Still, the numbers are not yet at a point where the project can be transferred fully to NSRAA. The organization is dependent on collecting and releasing broodstock from Little Port Walter for at least another few years, until the stock is successfully established and returning to Hidden Falls.

"This year, we'll have the first brood year of Keta returning as 1-ocean jacks to Hidden Falls," says Taylor Scott, NSRAA Assistant Research Manager. "Typically, that means they will be mostly male, so we will still need to collect females at LPW."

Taylor is hopeful enough Keta will return to Hidden Falls next year for NSRAA to begin collecting eggs for production.

"Until we're sure there are enough fish returning to Hidden Falls, we can't stop our work at Little Port Walter," she says.

The closure of the facility makes NSRAA's work on the Keta broodstock more difficult – and more expensive, as the organization is now shouldering to entire cost of the project. Fortunately, NSRAA board has been supportive of continuing the project despite several difficult financial years. The organization received nearly \$650,000 in grant money from the Pacific Salmon Treaty (PST) funds to use toward the project.

NOAA closed the buildings this winter and is moving toward decommissioning the site.

"It's disappointing to see NOAA pull out – and not just for the Keta project," Taylor says. "The place has been there nearly 100 years, doing

cont. on page 7



LPW Research Station

Medvejie immunization trial (cont'd from page 2)

“The problem is that not all the fish eat at the same rate, so some fish get more of a dose and others might get little to none,” Jared says. “You never really know how well it is distributed to your entire population. There is more room for error.”

Even with the immunized feed, the chum reared at Medvejie, Deep Inlet and Crawfish Inlet have been compromised by vibrio. The best solution when the bacteria begins to cause mortality and spread among the fish is to release them to the ocean.

“Especially in the past five years, we’ve struggled to get them to their release size goals before having to release them into the ocean,” he explains.

Identifying the onset of an infection is relatively straightforward. When an infection is detected, NSRAA staff uses a conservative strategy and releases the fish to the ocean before losses become substantial. This usually means the salmon are released smaller than their goal weight.

The immersion method will require that the staff get them out of the net pens and into the immersion bath, which is not only difficult but will likely cause more stress for the fish – adding another potential compromising factor to their survival.

“Overall, it’s a pretty big process and a much more stressful event,” Jared says. “It is a risk, but it seems worthwhile, given the problems we’ve had with vibrio the past few years.”

The trial began this spring, with 50 percent of the chum receiving immunization through food and the other half by immersion. Unfortunately, there was not enough of a difference between the groups this spring to indicate that one method is better than the other. The hatchery plans to repeat the process again at least one more year before determining whether to continue the trial or pursue one method over the other.



Chum immersion immunization at Medvejie

NSRAA 2026 Return Projections					
Site	Projected Return	Range		2025 Return	2025 Forecast
		Low	High		
Chum					
Hidden Falls/Takatz*	409,000	146,000	583,000	1,030,813	2,666,000
Medvejie/Deep Inlet*	1,762,000	1,078,000	2,208,000	2,181,498	2,059,000
Crawfish Inlet	281,000	164,000	593,000	262,360	454,000
Southeast Cove	105,000	74,000	399,000	563,009	587,000
Gunnuk Creek	18,000	6,000	43,000	15,104	32,000
Thomas Bay	115,000	68,000	226,000	188,795	379,000
	2,690,000	1,536,000	4,052,000	4,241,579	6,177,000
Chinook					
NEW- Hidden Falls (KETA STOCK)	400	200	700	-	-
Southeast Cove	860	500	1,060	1,410	550
Gunnuk Creek	310	190	600	517	850
Medvejie	13,900	10,600	18,600	23,525	24,700
Crawfish Inlet	500	400	600	528	1,100
Crescent Bay	1,900	900	3,300	1,165	2,100
Little Port Walter	1,100	800	1,400	1,665	489
	18,970	13,590	26,260	28,810	29,789
Coho					
Hidden Falls	50,000	26,000	75,000	55,229	51,000
Deer Lake	44,000	29,000	58,000	21,821	48,000
Lake Stocking					
Medvejie	8,000	6,000	12,000	6,436	9,000
Deep Inlet	29,000	19,000	37,000	26,238	22,000
	131,000	80,000	182,000	109,724	130,000
ALL SPECIES TOTALS:	2,839,970	1,629,590	4,260,260	4,380,113	6,336,789

* Cooperative Projects:
Projections for Medvejie/Deep Inlet are for total returns (NSRAA + SJH fish)
Projections for Hidden Falls/Takatz are for total returns (NSRAA + AKI fish)

Board Member Update

NSRAA welcomed two newcomers to its board this spring: Tyler Emerson and Nick Nekeferoff (pronounced Neh-kee-fer-off). Both are third-generation commercial fishermen who have spent much of their lives fishing the waters of Southeast Alaska.

Tyler, 35, who was raised in a power troller family, has been running his own vessel for the past ten years. Based in Juneau, he primarily fishes the Cross Sound area, but has spent many seasons trolling in Sitka Sound.

Tyler decided to run for the board because he has seen, first-hand, the value NSRAA fish bring to the troll fleet and wanted to be sure his fleet is adequately represented as the organization discusses the potential of an assessment tax on the fleets.

“Hatchery production helps make our fishery more diverse and resilient, especially with the ongoing challenges surrounding the treaty process, king salmon allocation issues, and the years when wild coho runs are weaker than we’d hope,” he says. “These fish help spread out the fleet and sustain our fishery. I would like to see the troll fishery continue to benefit from these fish and hopefully grow into our target allocation”

In addition to serving on the NSRAA Board, Tyler serves on the boards of Douglas Island Pink and Chum Inc. (DIPAC), the Alaska Trollers Association, as well as the City and Borough of Juneau Docks and Harbors.

This is Nick’s first foray into fish politics. The 48-year-old gillnetter has lived in Sitka since he was three. Though he has attended NSRAA board meetings previously, this is his first time on the board. Nick decided to run for the open gillnetter’s seat to ensure Sitka had a local representative and to get a deeper understanding of the issues affecting the fleets.

“I’m most concerned about how (NSRAA) is taking care of cost recovery,” he says, explaining that he’d like to see NSRAA’s cost recovery operations handled more efficiently, to limit closures and maximize fishing time for the fleets.

Nick sat on the board in the fall to help with a vacancy, but the spring meeting was his first as a board member. He admits that there is a lot of information he has yet to learn and understand.

“I’m a fisherman – I’m not a politician,” he says, and laughs.

NSRAA FY27 Budget

Projected Income - FY27		
Year	Income Source	Amount
2025	Enhancement tax	\$1,596,384
Revenue - Fish sales / Assessment tax:		
2026	- Amount required from Chum	\$6,973,767
Cost Recovery		
2025	- Chum	\$0
2025	- Chinook	\$78,323
2025	- Coho	\$209,801
2025	- Incidental species	\$30,550
2025	- Roe	\$0
2025	- Carcass	\$7,281
Other Revenue / Funds from Reserves		
2025	Rental Income	\$36,040
2025	Investment Earnings (net of fees)	\$1,145,843
2025	From unrestricted Reserves	\$800,000
2025	From Capital Reserves	\$1,660,000
Total		\$12,537,989
Projected Expenses - FY27		
Expense Source		Amount
Operational Budget		\$10,877,989
Capital Budget		\$1,660,000
Total		\$12,537,989

LPW closed (cont'd from page 5)

marine research for decades. The site is home to a significant amount of Southeast Alaska fisheries and cultural history.”

“The closure makes our work more logistically challenging,” says NSRAA General Manager, Scott Wagner. “Everything will be more challenging without having access to the infrastructure there. For the most part, our work there will be water-based. We’ll tie up to the dock, but that’s the extent of our access.”

No one knows exactly what will become of the historic facility or how the closure could affect the future of the Keta project.

“It leaves us in a weird spot,” Taylor says. “We still have fish returning there and we’re in the middle of transitioning the Keta stock to Hidden Falls. Continuing the work without NOAA’s cooperative support will be arduous.”

Ultimately, NSRAA hopes to rear the Keta Chinook at both its Hidden Falls and Sawmill Creek hatcheries. The Sawmill Creek hatchery expansion, which is scheduled to be completed in 2027, was designed with the goal of increasing Chinook production there.

The PST monies will help fund the project through 2028, but NSRAA may still need more time before ending its work at Little Port Walter.

“Even before NSRAA’s involvement, the purpose of this whole project was to produce (Chinook) for the trollers and for common property enhancement,” Taylor explains.

The success of the program is currently dependent on the broodstock returning to Little Port Walter. Only time will tell if the Keta Chinook

returning to Hidden Falls will do as well. If, for some reason, those fish suffer significantly lower marine survivals, the broodstock at Little Port Walter offer NSRAA a safety net of sorts.

If NSRAA were to transfer the entire operation to NSRAA’s hatcheries too soon, it could risk extinction of the hatchery stock and compromise the entire project, Taylor says.

The first brood year of Keta released from Hidden Falls will return through 2029. While NSRAA may have a good idea of the survival rates of that brood year by 2028, Taylor says it would likely need until 2029 – or even longer – to know for certain whether the Keta program is doing well enough to be transferred entirely to NSRAA’s facilities.

“Until we’re somewhat assured that the stock is going to take and return to Hidden Falls in sufficient numbers, we can’t discontinue our work at Little Port Walter,” Scott says.

NSRAA hopes to have enough surplus eggs to begin releasing some of the Keta stock from Crawfish Inlet, in order to further diversify the returns. In the past decade or so, sudden drops in NSRAA’s salmon returns have tended to be specific to an area. If NSRAA can release the Keta from two sites, the hope is that if one site does poorly, the other site would still do well enough to continue the program.

“We are tremendously hopeful that the stock successfully adapts to Hidden Falls and that the historic structures and buildings at Little Port Walter can be preserved,” Taylor says.

Staff Profile: Kevin Connell



Kevin and fiancé, Madison, vacationing

Kevin Connell was a teenager, scuba diving in the clear, warm waters off the coast of Mexico, swimming among schools of fish, massive groupers, sharks and moray eels, when he realized he wanted to work in fisheries.

“It was a surreal experience,” says Kevin, who grew up in the farmlands of Ohio, occasionally fishing for catfish in Lake Erie and the Miami River. “I always liked fishing, but that really sparked that interest for me.”

After graduating high school, Kevin went on to study biology at Bowling Green State University. In the summers, he went to Mississippi for an internship with the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory and took fisheries classes with the University of Southern Mississippi (USM). Kevin gained his first aquaculture association experience through USM's Thad Cochran Marine Aquaculture Center, working with trout and red snapper. While tagging sharks during his last summer in Mississippi, he met Madison, who would later become his fiancé.

“That internship helped me land my first aquaculture job,” he says.

A lot of people dream of moving to Alaska, but for Kevin, it just happened that of all the job applications he sent out after he graduated college, it was an aquaculture association in Alaska that offered him a job. Kevin moved to Alaska to work as a fish technician for Prince William Sound Aquaculture Corporation, working with pink and chum salmon at its remote Armin F. Koenig (AFK) Hatchery.

“It was my first time in Alaska and my first time seeing mountains,” Kevin says.

After two years at AFK, Kevin and Madison transferred to NSRAA, where Kevin took the assistant manager position at the Hidden Falls Hatchery. That was in 2020. He has since earned a Master's degree in Fisheries and Wildlife Administration and moved into the manager position. Madison also works at Hidden Falls now, as the lead culturist.

Remote living in Alaska is dramatically different to Kevin's life in Ohio, but he loves it.

“You’re very entangled with the ecosystem,” he says. “Whales come up to the dock, you live alongside bear, you’ve got birds and sea lions feeding on the salmon. We’re a pretty big driver for wildlife here at Hidden Falls.”

But living remotely has its challenges, too – especially for the hatchery manager. All supplies, even groceries, must be scheduled to be delivered by boat or float plane. Any delays or cancellations can have ripple effects throughout the hatchery and its operations.

"I feel like the logistics of running a large-scale hatchery that is remote is the biggest challenge," he says. "But I find it rewarding when things run well under pressure. Hidden Falls is a very complex hatchery, so when everything runs smoothly and everyone is aligned and communication is strong and we actually execute production goals, it's very satisfying."

Though the management position means more time in the office, Kevin still works directly with the salmon almost every day.

"I enjoy the hands on (work)," he says, "But I think what I'm proudest of is the team we've built out here. They have each other's backs. They care a lot. Watching staff grow, take ownership, put in the energy, the effort and really want to be part of something bigger – that is the most rewarding. When the culture at the hatchery is strong, operations are better and the fish do better."

[illegible]