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BILL TAYLOR

Conservation deal offers life ring to Atlantic salmon

Anglers waiting at their favorite pools in the rivers for salmon to return from their migration will welcome a new conservation agreement with commercial fishermen in Greenland. What's the connection? Well, many of the Atlantic salmon that are born in eastern North American rivers undertake a rigorous migration from their birth streams to feeding grounds off Greenland for a couple of years, before returning to their birthplace to spawn.

In the past, the Greenland commercial fishery has killed thousands of salmon destined for North American and Southern European rivers — some of them from critically low runs in Maine specifically and New England at large, where literally every fish counts.

Thanks to international diplomacy, conservationists in Canada, the United States, Iceland and Greenland reached a new agreement last month that will suspend commercial salmon fisheries in Greenland's territorial waters for seven years, beginning with the 2007 season.

The agreement is a necessary "insurance policy," judging from runs so far this season. As of early July, very few salmon have returned to rivers in eastern Canada and northeastern United States. The new agreement signed by three nongovernmental organizations — the Atlantic Salmon Federation, or ASF, of North America, the North Atlantic Salmon Fund, or NASF, of Iceland, and the Organization of Fishermen and Hunters in Greenland — has been endorsed by the Greenland Home Rule Government.

The idea behind the agreement is to reduce the human kill of wild Atlantic salmon, while scientists try to find out what else in the ocean is a threat. At home, it's important that anglers practice live release and governments impose fisheries management plans that keep the kill of salmon to a minimum.

Salmon that make the long Greenland migration are particularly susceptible to mortality at sea. Scientists at the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, or ICES, have recommended that there be no kill of salmon off West Greenland for at least the next four years. They estimate that the large salmon on Greenland feeding grounds have declined from 917,000 in 1975 to a predicted 113,000 in 2007, a decline of 89 percent. Predictions for 2008 and 2009 are 118,000 and 114,000. This is more alarming when considering that these num-

bers represent the population in the waters off Greenland. However, scientists predict that only about half the number of large salmon required to meet basic conservation requirements in North America will return from those waters.

So far this year, it appears that ICES predictions are only too true. Ocean waters have been very cold and this may be contributing to late salmon returns, or worse, outright deaths of salmon. The situation would be even worse without our first Greenland Conservation Agreement, which saved thousands of salmon. The new agreement means that, when their fishing season opens in August, Greenland fishermen will continue to refrain from fishing salmon commercially.

The new agreement still allows the continuation of salmon fishing for recreation and local consumption, but calls for a sustained effort to reduce the number of salmon being killed in these non-commercial fisheries. It also requires that the government continue to abide by the scientific recommendations of ICES and adhere to a zero commercial quota, under the international treaty, Convention for the Conservation of Salmon in the North Atlantic Ocean, 1982.

ASF and NASF will provide annual contributions to a "Salmon Fund" in Greenland, which will be used to finance projects that redirect salmon fishermen into alternative sustainable fisheries, reduce bycatch of salmon in those fisheries, purchase and destroy salmon nets, and provide employment in coastal communities.

The ASF is proud of our participation in this agreement that is achieved through international diplomacy and partially funded through the generosity of our members and directors. We are happy to be able to do everything in our power to limit any kill of wild Atlantic salmon that can be controlled. In the meantime, we are carrying out research into the mysteries of how salmon are meeting their deaths at sea — a changing environment, food scarcity or increased predation are three of many possibilities. Every year, we wait patiently for our salmon to show up in abundance in our rivers, knowing that the combination of international agreements with domestic research and conservation brings us closer to that goal.

Bill Taylor is president and CEO of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, an international conservation organization based in St.