

Board of Fisheries Meeting: Statewide King and Tanner Crab, March 17-21, 2014

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Proposal # 346 – Norton Sound Section red king crab harvest strategy.

This proposal was submitted as a placeholder to address concerns with the Norton Sound red king crab harvest strategy. In this fishery in 2013, only 78% of the Guideline Harvest Level (GHL) was harvested. This left more than \$600,000 worth of crab in the water (ex-vessel value), no small amount for the economy of Norton Sound. We would like the Board to address this failure of management.

Background

The stock is one of the most stable in the state and has recently been the subject of much review from the crab planning team, their model review committee, and from local surveys by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) and the Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC). All are in agreement that healthy recruitment is ongoing and the stock is abundant. The GHL is set each year according to 5ACC34.915, which requires the GHL to be *at most* 15% of the legal male biomass, even when abundance is high. (At lower abundance the harvest percentage must be even lower.) This is a conservative harvest strategy, and ADF&G should manage this fishery to ensure that the GHL is harvested.

2013 Season

In 2013, catch rates were low; the average landing was 860 pounds of crab, compared to an average landing of 1570 pounds of crab over the previous seven years. Catch rates were low from the beginning of the season in early July. No one believes the low catch rates were due to a lack of crab; the consensus of ADF&G, the crab fishermen and NSEDC is that the low catch rates occur when the movement of crab is different from a typical year, particularly their off-shore migration. Similar catch rates occurred in the 2009 season, and subsequent surveys showed that abundance had NOT decreased. When catch rates are low, ADF&G has two options to try to ensure that the entire GHL is harvested. One option is to extend the season. The other option is to open some of the closed area (i.e. "relax the line").

Extending the Season

The season is closed by regulation (5AAC34.910) at 12:00 noon, September 3. However, ADF&G has extended the season by two or three weeks in both 2009 and 2013. This is bad idea for biological reasons and a bad idea for economic reasons. The closure date was set in regulation to avoid fishing during the molt,

when mortality is increased and crabs are commercially undesirable. Furthermore, extending the season means more trips for the fishermen and higher costs. If catch rates had been "normal", the 2013 harvest could have been completed with 187 fewer trips. These extra trips cost fishermen a quarter million dollars. Extending the season is not an efficient way to manage the fishery.

Efficiency of fishery

To efficiently manage the fishery, part of the closed area should be opened. In fact regulation 5AAC 34.935 (a) says, "The commissioner may, by emergency order, reduce by small increments, the closed waters to no less than 3 miles from mean lower low tide to allow the commercial king crab fishery *to efficiently obtain the allowable harvest of red king crab.*" (Our italics.) In 2009, ADF&G did not reduce the closed waters, and in 2013 ADF&G made one small reduction to the closed waters late in the season. Their decisions to rely more on season extensions rather than line relaxations were detrimental to the efficiency of the fishery in both years, contrary to the direction in the regulations, and in 2013 led to a failure to harvest the GHL at an ex-vessel cost of \$620,000.

What do we propose?

We believe that the current regulations give ADF&G the ability to manage the fishery efficiently by reducing the closed waters. Although ADF&G has the ability to extend the season by Emergency Order, we do not believe it was the Board's intent that ADF&G use this authority as their primary tool to harvest the GHL. After all, the current regulations were the result of the Board directing the fishery away from the molt in 1979, and then recognizing the need for efficiency in two subsequent board cycles. We would like clarification from the Board on their intent regarding these two competing strategies.