

1995 FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR NORTON SOUND SECTION

RED KING CRAB

(Summer Fishery Only)

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and

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INTRODUCTION

The Norton Sound Section consists of all waters in statistical area Q that are north of the latitude of Cape Romanzof, east of 168° west longitude, and south of the latitude of Cape Prince of Wales (Figures 1 and 2). A large vessel summer commercial fishery has existed in this section since 1977. Limited local sales of king crab taken during the winter by Nome fishermen have also occurred for a number of years. Subsistence fishing for king crab through the ice occurs throughout the section during the winter.

STATUS OF STOCKS/RESEARCH

The Norton Sound king crab population in 1976 was largely composed of recruit and prerecruit crab. Crab abundance reached its peak in 1978 when 11 million pounds of legal male crab were estimated. Norton Sound king crab stock monitoring has included 6 trawl surveys and 4 pot assessment surveys from 1976-1991, and 9 winter studies from 1982-1991. The results of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) trawl surveys and Alaska Department of Fish and Game pot assessment surveys are presented in Table 3. The most recent population assessment work occurred during the late summer of 1991, when a trawl survey was conducted by NMFS.

From 1979 to 1982, the population experienced very low recruitment and the fishery was almost entirely supported by older postrecruit crab. This was apparent from the average weight of individual crab captured in the commercial catch, which increased from 2.7 (1979) to 3.7 (1982) pounds/crab. As a result of fishing and natural mortality, the abundance of legal crab dropped to an estimated 1.3 million pounds in 1982.

Increased abundance of sublegal crab in both the NMFS and ADF&G 1985 research surveys indicated that improved recruitment had resulted in a moderate increase in the abundance of legal crab. A preseason population estimate of 3 million pounds was made for the 1985 season based on the ADF&G pot survey. Further analysis of the survey data placed the legal male population at 2.4 million pounds. Based on the information collected in 1985 and the apparent stable level of recruitment, the 1987 preseason harvest was set at 400,000 pounds, an exploitation rate of 20%. Unfortunately, it became apparent that recruitment levels had declined from the previous 5 year average (1982-1986) of 47% to 23%. The season was closed when 327,000 pounds had been caught. The average weight had increased to 3.2 pounds per individual crab from an average of 2.9. In subsequent seasons, the fishery was managed at an exploitation rate of 10%. Because the recruitment levels had dropped, the exploitation rate was reduced proportionately.

The 1991 summer season was not conducted because the budget for managing the fishery had been eliminated there was no operating budget with which to monitor the fishery or monitor the population without raiding other budgets. The last population study had not indicated much recruitment and recent catch rates seemed to be declining.

During late August of 1991, NMFS conducted their triennial trawl survey to assess the abundance of Norton Sound red king crab. The results of that survey became available that spring. There appears to be a gradual trend of increasing abundance since the low levels of 1982. The survey estimated 3.4 million pounds of legal king crab in the open commercial fishing district.

The 1992 season was greatly affected by the late sea ice break-up and the placement of a 100 pot limit per vessel. The crab's normal offshore migration was delayed so that fewer than normal crab were available for harvest. The pot limit encouraged a greater than normal level of participation in the fishery. The combined effect from these factors caused the fishery to be closed after only two days with less than a quarter of the harvest goal being taken.

The over capitalization of the Norton Sound fishery was brought to the Board of Fisheries the following winter. In an effort to address the trend of intensifying fishing effort, the Board enacted a package of proposals reducing the pot limit to 40 pots for vessels 125 feet or less in length and to 50 pots for larger vessels. Season length was adjusted and exclusive registration was required to complete the package. The net affect was to change the character of the fishery to a shore based small vessel fleet.

The fact that processing vessels no longer found it economical to participate in the Norton Sound fishery resulted in observers no longer being present to take biological samples from the crab stock. Port sampling observations collected during the summer of 1994 found poor recruitment. In fact, all size classes of crab showed very low levels of molting. Department staff became concerned that a system wide failure might be occurring. The staff reinstated the winter pot survey program to index growth and incidence of molting prior to the 1995 summer season. The findings of that study revealed a high level of molting in all size categories and a strong level of recruitment. The fishing fleet was informed that harvest rates would continue at recent levels as a result of these findings.

STATUS OF FISHERY

Commercial catches made during the summer fishery have ranged from 2.9 million pounds in 1979 to 0.07 million pounds in 1992. Annual commercial catch data for this fishery are presented in Table 1. Deadloss was a major problem during 1977-79 but was largely eliminated after 1980 because crab were processed one or two days after being captured. Another factor reducing deadloss was that fishing and processing vessels have avoided inshore waters, which have a low surface salinity that crab cannot tolerate.

A winter commercial fishery also occurs from November 15 through May 15 when crab are taken through the ice. A total of 25,000 pounds of crab was sold during the winter of 1978. From 1979 to 1984, the winter commercial fishery virtually ceased to exist due to low catch rates. Since 1984, the winter harvest has recovered to some extent. During the past winter, 1994-95, the commercial harvest was approximately 5,000 crab or roughly 15,000 pounds. This winter harvest was possible because of the stable and extensive shorefast ice conditions. During 1995, 44 local fishermen participated in the winter

commercial fishery, doubling the previous year's participation. Commercial sales of king crab from eastern Norton Sound winter fishery continued, as they have since 1992.

Red king crab are utilized by Norton Sound residents for subsistence as well as commercial purposes. Both fisheries occur in the winter through holes or cracks in the ice. The average catch per family in 1992 was about 100 crab. Permittees during winters with unstable ice conditions commonly report harvests in the neighborhood of 60 crab and during years of stable ice conditions the average climbs to over 100 crab. The 1992 winter subsistence harvest totalled 9,708 crab. Of the 158 families receiving permits 126 returned their permits, and of those only 101 permittees reported having fished. Table 2 summarizes winter commercial and subsistence red king crab fishery data.

OUTLOOK FOR 1995

A conservative quota of 340,000 pounds has been set for the Norton Sound Section during the 1995 season. The red king crab population is estimated to be less than 1/3 of the historic population. The population level has increased only slightly since 1985 suggesting a slow modest response to management conservation actions including reduced exploitation and no summer commercial fishery during 1991. A 340,000 pound harvest equates to roughly a 10% exploitation level. It is hoped that this rate of exploitation will allow the crab population to recover and stabilize at a higher level.

Port samplers will be stationed at Unalakleet and Nome. The Nome office will continue to be the center of management for the fishery but the catch reporting schedule may change to accommodate the slower pace of the fishery.

Fishermen are advised that each vessel is required to turn in a fish ticket within 24 hours of the final delivery of their catch within Norton Sound. If the vessel travels outside the section to deliver their catch they must advise the Nome Fish and Game office and agree to a reporting time and method prior to departure from the section.

With earlier opening date of the fishery, we will probably find it necessary to relax the closure boundary northward and eastward. In the past, the line has been moved five nautical miles northward four times. Immediately prior to the season a study will be conducted to determine the distribution of legal and sublegal crab. The study will be used to set the nearshore closure line. The findings will be made public prior to the opening of the season. If catch reporting becomes a problem or a high proportion of the harvest is found to be sublegals, the restrictions might be reimplemented. The Department reserves the right to close a fishery if it becomes unmanageable.

IMPORTANT REGULATIONS

Harvest Strategy (5AAC 34.915):

States "the department shall manage the Norton Sound Section summer season king crab fishery for a harvest of one-half of the exploitation rate common in other Bering Sea commercial king crab fisheries."

Fishing Season (5AAC 34.910 (d) (1)):

The commercial king crab season in the Norton Sound Section of the Northern District occurs from 12:00 noon July 1 through 12:00 noon September 3 or until the optimum yield (OY) is taken. King crab pots may not be set until 12:00 noon July 1 and the vessel has received a tank inspection.

A commercial fisherman may not operate subsistence gear less than 14 days before or after their participating in a commercial king crab fishery.

Tank Inspections (5AAC 34.940), (5AAC 34.950 (a) (b) (c) (d)), (5AAC 34.070) : Vessels planning to fish in the Northern District must have their holds inspected before fishing. Vessels that plan to begin fishing in the Norton Sound Section must receive a tank inspection from either the Nome or Unalakleet ADF&G office. Inspections will begin at 12:00 noon June 29. Inspections will continue on a daily basis as needed and will be conducted during office hours. Appointments should be made at least 24 hours prior to desired time of inspection. If poor weather prevents Department personnel from boarding vessels, tank inspection requirements will not be waived. Tank inspections will be given when weather subsides.

Permits (16.05.480 (a)):

A king crab fishing permit for the Norton Sound Section of the Bering Sea (K--Z) is required for fishing in Norton Sound. The fishing vessel must also be licensed. All crew members must be licensed.

Pot Limit (5 AA 34.925. (i) and (j) and 5 AA 34.050. (e)):

No more than 40 king crab pots may operate from a vessel of 125 feet or less in length or 50 pots if the vessel is larger in the Norton Sound Section or Area Q3. Each pot must have its own identification tag issued by the Department. To replace lost tags a sworn statement signed by the vessel operator and three crew members describing how they were lost must be submitted to the Dutch Harbor office.

Fishing Vessel Registration/Catch Reporting (5AAC 34.950. (a)), (5AAC 39.130):

Vessels planning to fish in the Northern District must register for the district. District registration can be completed during the tank inspection. During registration catch reporting schedules will be established and fishermen will be required to report daily the number of crab taken, number of pots pulled, area

fished, and information on tagged crab recoveries. Codes will be provided so that reports can be kept confidential.

Reporting Requirements (5AAC 34.035 (h)):

If delivery of the catch is to be made in the registration area where the crab are taken, then the catch report is due within 24 hours of delivery. If the catch is to be delivered outside the registration area, then the fisherman is required to set up a reporting time with a Department representative from the Nome office prior to leaving the section. All deadloss and crab kept for home use out of the commercial harvest must also be reported.

Tender/Processors (5AAC 34.940), (5AAC 34.950), (5AAC 34.070):

Prior to operating, Norton Sound processors must report to the Nome ADF&G office. When an operator intends to leave the management section, he must check out by making personal or radio contact with the Nome office, stating the number of king crab on board at the time of departure. He shall also indicate his unloading destination. Fish tickets will be turned into the Nome office no later than one week after the fishery closes.

Sex and Size Restrictions (5AAC 34.920 (d), (5AAC 34.065):

A 4-3/4" minimum carapace width size limit will be in effect for red king crab, and only males can be harvested. Male blue king crab with a carapace width of 5-1/2" or greater may also be harvested.

Gear Requirements (5AAC 34.050):

Each pot will have its own buoy.

Each pot must have a pot tag which can be purchased at ADF&G.

Each buoy must have the vessel license number plainly marked with letters at least 4 inches in height.

Each pot must have an escape mechanism that will allow crab to escape after a period of time if the pot should get lost. By regulation a slash must be made 18 inches in length and within 6 inches of the bottom. The slash is sewn shut with 30 strand untreated cotton thread and is tied at both ends only. 30-day Galvanic Time Release Devices (GTR) may be substituted for the cotton string.

Gear Storage (5AAC 34.925 (g)):

Prior to and after the fishing season, gear must be stored in the specified gear storage area and may not be stored in waters less than 25 fathoms. At the time of the season closure, pots must be removed from the water or be moved to open waters (St. Lawrence Section, August 1-Sept. 3).

Closed Waters (5AAC 34.935 (a) (b)):

All waters of the Norton Sound Section enclosed by a line from 65° 23' N. latitude, 167° W. longitude to 64° 15' N. latitude, 167° W. longitude to 64° 15' N. latitude, 162° W. longitude to 63° 27' N. latitude, 162° W. longitude are closed to the taking of king crab from July 1 through September 3. (See Figure 2.) The Department may reduce, by small increments, the closed waters to no less than three miles from mean lower low tide to allow the commercial crab fishery to more efficiently obtain the allowable harvest.

Tanner Crab Closure (5AAC 35.510 (b)):

Tanner crab may not be taken or possessed in the Norton Sound section. This regulation was enacted in March 1982 to prevent circumvention of the king crab regulations and because there are no commercially sized tanner crab in Norton Sound.

Bait harvest by crab permit holders (5AAC 27.971. and 5ACC 28.670.):

These regulations allow a permit holder to harvest up to a ton of herring or groundfish for use as commercial bait for their own use. These fish may not be sold and must be reported on a fish ticket. Herring may not be harvested under these regulations within 72 hours of a commercial opening.

Table 1. Summer commercial red king crab harvest and effort, Norton Sound, 1977-1994.

Year	Days Fished	Number of Vessels	Total Number of Pots	Average # of Pots per Vessel	Range of Pots Per Vessel	Number of Pot Lifts	Crab Per Pot	Commercial Harvest ^a
1977	60	7				5,457	36	0.52
1978	60	8				10,817	64	2.09
1979	16	34				34,773	28	2.93
1980	16	9				11,199	29	1.19
1981	38	36				33,745	11	1.38
1982	23	11				11,230	6	0.23
1983	3	23	3,583	156	68-290	11,195	12	0.37
1984	13.6	8	1,245	156	70-250	9,706	14	0.39
1985	21.7	6	1,116	186	106-280	13,209	11	0.43
1986	13	3	578	193	85-278	4,284	38	0.48
1987	11	9	1,430	159	75-287	10,258	10	0.33
1988	9.9	2	360	180	110-250	2,350	32	0.24
1989	3	10	2,555	256	67-432	5,149	15	0.25
1990 ^b	4	4	1,388	347	288-400	3,172	19	0.19
1991 ^c	0	0	No Season			0	0	0
1992	2	27	2,635	98	35-100	5,746	4	0.07
1993	50	14	560	40	40	7,063	16	0.33
1994	31	34	1,260	37	10-40	11,729	9	0.33
Average ^d	20	13	1,654	195		11,486	22	0.79
Range ^d	3-60	2-23	360-3,583	156-347		2,350-34,773	6-64	0.19-2.93

^a Harvest in millions of pounds.

^b All vessels participating were catcher/processors.

^c No summer season.

^d Averages and ranges do not include the 1991,1992, 1993 and 1994 season.

Table 2. Winter commercial and subsistence red king crab harvests, Norton Sound 1978-1994.

COMMERCIAL			SUBSISTENCE						
Year ¹	Fisher- men	#Crab Harvested	Winter ²	Permits Issued	Permits Returned	Permits Fished	Total Crab Caught ³	Total Crab Harvested ⁴	Average Harvest/fm
1978	37	9,625	1977-78	290	206	149	5	12,506	84
1979	1	221	1978-79	48	43	38	5	224	6
1980	1	22	1979-80	22	14	9	5	213	24
1981	0	0	1980-81	51	39	23	5	360	16
1982	1	17	1981-82	101	76	54	5	1,288	24
1983	5	549	1982-83	172	106	85	5	10,432	123
1984	8	856	1983-84	222	183	143	15,923	11,220	78
1985	9	1,168	1984-85	203	166	132	10,757	8,377	63
1986	5	2,168	1985-86	136	133	107	10,751	7,052	66
1987	7	1,040	1986-87	138	134	98	7,406	5,772	59
1988	10	425	1987-88	71	58	40	3,573	2,724	68
1989	5	403	1988-89	139	115	94	7,945	6,126	65
1990	13	3,626	1989-90	136	118	107	16,635	12,152	114
1991	11	3,800	1990-91	119	104	79	9,295	7,366	93
1992	13	7,478	1991-92	158	105	105	15,051	11,736	112
1993	8	1,788	1992-93	88	79	37	1,193	1,097	30
1994	25	5,753	1993-94	118	95	71	4,894	4,113	58

¹ Prior to 1985 the winter commercial fishery occurred from January 1 - April 30; as of March 1985, the winter commercial harvest may occur from November 15 - May 15.

² The winter subsistence fishery occurs during months of two calendar years (as early as December, through May).

³ The number of crab actually caught; some may have been returned.

⁴ The number of crab "harvested" is the number of crab caught and kept.

⁵ Data unavailable.

Table 3. Results of the population assessment surveys conducted for red king crab in Norton Sound since 1976.

Year	Date	Research Agency	Vessel	Gear Effort	Number of Red King Crab Captured ¹			Population Estimates of Legal Male Crab ³	
					Sublegal Males	Legal ² Males	Females	Numbers	Pounds
1976	9/02 - 9/05 9/16 -10/07	NMFS	Miller-Freeman	Trawl 158 tows	768	555	180	3,119,800	8,111,480
1979	7/26 - 8/05	NMFS	Miller-Freeman	Trawl 71 tows	46	194	40	837,241	2,511,723
1980	7/04 - 7/14	ADF&G	Altair	Pots 397 lifts	443	3,290	158	1,900,000	6,600,000 ⁴
1981	6/28 - 7/14	ADF&G	Altair	Pots 718 lifts	4,097	3,415	1,933	1,285,195	4,755,221
1982	7/06 - 7/20	ADF&G	Aleutian #1	Pots 689 lifts	5,019	2,001	424	353,273	1,271,783
1982	9/05 - 9/11	NMFS	Miller-Freeman	Trawl 50 tows	322	107	265	970,646	2,620,744
1985	7/01 - 7/14	ADF&G	Arctic Sea	Pots 642 lifts	6,086	4,645	181	907,579	2,414,644
1985	9/16 -10/01	NMFS	Argosy	Trawl 78 tows	266	163	151	1,203,000	3,369,000
1988	8/16 - 8/30	NMFS	Miller-Freeman	Trawl 82 tows	258	141	218	1,037,000	3,038,000
1991	8/22 - 8/30	NMFS	Ocean Hope	Trawl 53 tows				1,384,000	4,009,000

¹ Number of crab captured on ADF&G surveys represent data standardized for a 24 hour soak.

² Legal male red king crab were defined as at least 106mm in carapace length for the 1976 NMFS survey; 105mm for the 1979, 1985, 1988 and 1991 NMFS survey; and at least 121mm in carapace width for all ADF&G surveys.

³ Population est. are valid for the date of the survey, ie either before or after the summer commercial fishery.

⁴ The 1980 estimate has been revised from the original estimate of 13.4 million pounds. The original estimate was thought inaccurate due to under-reporting of recovered tagged crab.

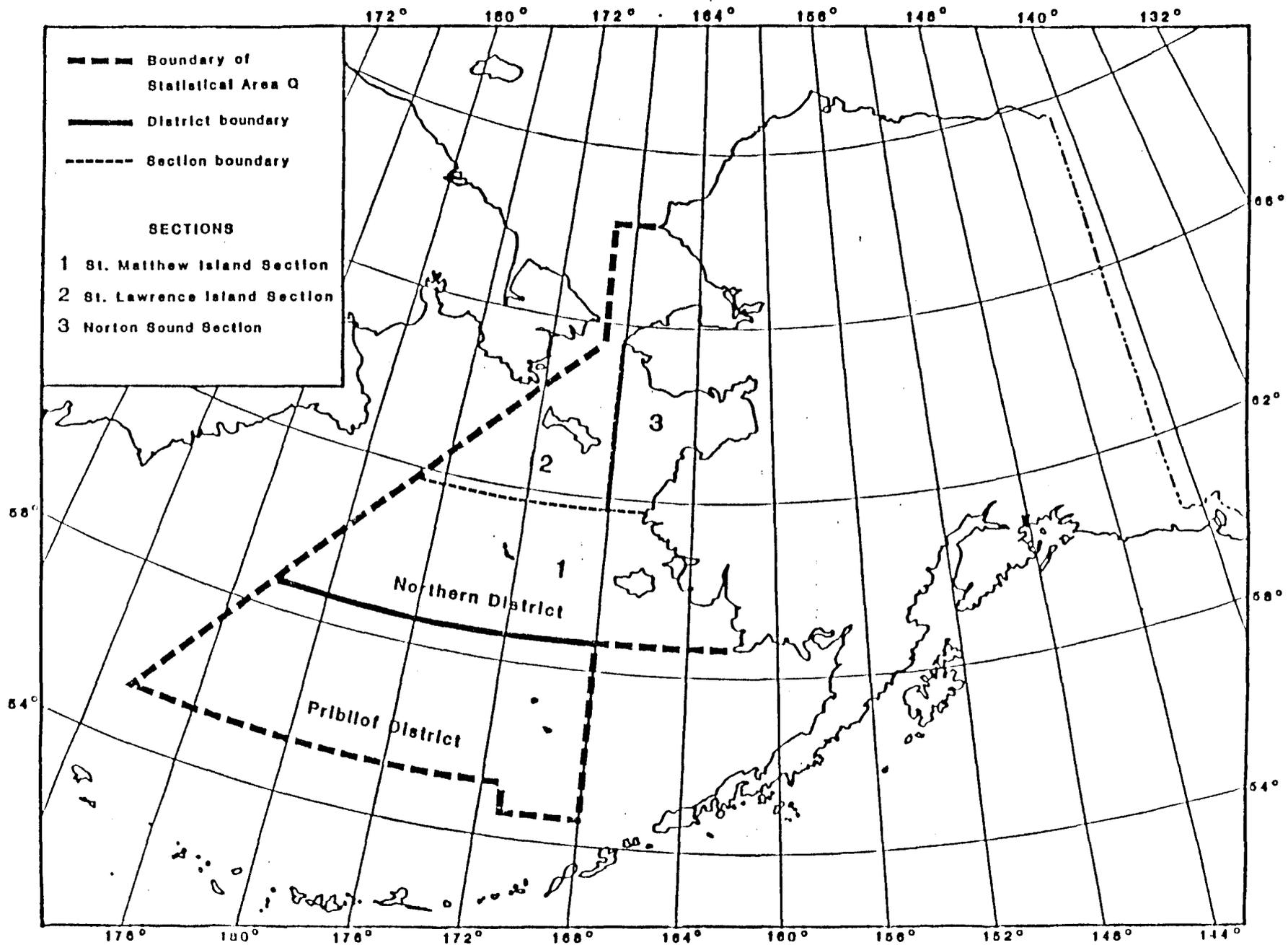


Figure 1. King crab fishing districts and sections of Statistical Area Q

Figure 2. Statistical areas for the Norton Sound Red King Crab Fishery.

