

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN
FOR THE
TANNER CRAB COMMERCIAL FISHERY
IN THE BERING SEA, 1999

by

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and

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INTRODUCTION

This fishery management plan is intended to provide a brief overview of the Tanner crab *Chionoecetes bairdi* fishery which occurs in the Bering Sea District. Information on general district description, brief historic fishery review, and summary of current management practices and policies should provide fishers and members of industry a better understanding of how the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) manages the Tanner crab fishery in this district of Westward Area J.

Description of Registration Area and Statistical Areas

The Bering Sea District of Registration Area J includes all waters of the Bering Sea north of the latitude of Cape Sarichef at 54°36' N lat. and east of the U.S.-Russia Convention Line of 1867. This district is divided into the Eastern and Western Subdistricts by a line at 173° W longitude. The Eastern Subdistrict is further divided at the latitude of Cape Romanzof and 168° W long., into the Norton Sound section to the east and the General Section to the west (Figure 1).

This management area is divided into statistical areas for catch reporting purposes. Statistical areas encompass one degree of longitude by one half degree of latitude (Figure 2). All commercial removals of Tanner crabs (including deadloss) are reported to ADF&G in reference to these statistical areas.

Historical Fishery Perspective

The first reported catches of Tanner crabs occurred in 1968, incidental to the red king crab *Paralithodes camtschaticus* fishery in Bristol Bay. In 1974, a directed Tanner crab fishery began. Harvest in the directed fishery peaked at an all time high of 66.6 million pounds during the 1977/78 season. In the fall of 1978, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) predicted sharp declines in Tanner crab abundance, beginning with the 1978/79 fishing season. Tanner crab stocks declined as anticipated, and by 1984, the commercial harvest fell to 1.2 million pounds. Further stock declines lead to a fishery closure during the 1986 and 1987 seasons (Table 1).

In 1994, the guideline harvest level (GHL) for Tanner crabs in the Eastern Subdistrict, west of 163° W long., was 7.5 million pounds. The total Tanner crab harvest in 1994 was 7.6 million pounds. In 1995, the Tanner crab GHL in the Eastern Subdistrict, west of 163° W long., was 5.5 million pounds. The total commercial Tanner crab harvest in that year was 4.2 million pounds. The GHL for the 1996 Tanner crab fishery was 8.4 million pounds. Due to poor fishery performance, the fishery was closed before the GHL was reached; a total of 1.8 million pounds was harvested (Table 1).

Based on results from the 1997 NMFS survey indicating significant declines in most segments of the Tanner crab population and poor fishery performance in 1996, the Bering Sea Tanner crab fishery remained closed for the 1997 season. Results from the 1998 NMFS survey indicated

large male and female Tanner crabs continued to decline to their lowest level in the history of the survey, therefore the fishery remained closed for the 1998 season. However, pre-recruit crabs showed an increase in 1998, indicating the potential for improved recruitment in the near future (Stevens et al. 1998).

REGULATIONS

The Bering Sea District is a nonexclusive Tanner crab registration area. Vessels which register and participate in this fishery are not excluded from other Tanner crab fisheries in non-exclusive registration areas. Specific regulations governing commercial Tanner crab fishing in the Bering Sea District are in CHAPTER 35. TANNER CRAB FISHERY on page 161 of the 1999-2000 Commercial Shellfish Fishing Regulation booklet. Some of the regulations are summarized below. This section does not include all regulations pertaining to the Bering Sea District. Fishers are encouraged to obtain the latest commercial shellfish regulation booklet from an ADF&G office. For additional information on regulations pertaining to the Bering Sea Tanner crab fishery, contact the ADF&G office in Dutch Harbor or Kodiak.

Fishing Seasons

Regulations which control opening and closing of the Tanner crab fishery are in 5 AAC 35.510 (6)(B) FISHING SEASONS FOR REGISTRATION AREA J. That portion of the Eastern Subdistrict east of 168° W long., except for the Norton Sound Section, is opened and closed to fishing for Tanner crabs concurrent to the regulatory opening and emergency order closure of the Area T (Bristol Bay) red king crab fishery. The Eastern Subdistrict between 163° and 173° W long. may reopen to fishing for Tanner crabs 10 days after the closure of the Area T king crab fishery, assuming the GHL has not been met. In the event the Bristol Bay red king crab fishery failed to open, that portion of the Eastern Subdistrict west of 163° W long., would be allowed to open on November 1 to a directed Tanner crab fishery. The area is closed by emergency order when the GHL is achieved or when stock status parameters, such as poor fishery performance or excessive bycatch of small or female crabs, indicate a closure is necessary to protect the long term health of the stock.

The Bristol Bay red king crab fishery opens annually at 4:00 p.m. on October 15, according to provisions of 5 AAC 34.810 (b) FISHING SEASONS FOR REGISTRATION AREA T. Vessels that are participating in the Bristol Bay red king crab fishery and harvesting incidentally-caught Tanner crabs must abide by all regulations governing commercial king crab fishing in the Bristol Bay red king crab fishery, beginning with 5 ACC 34.800 DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRATION AREA T. Specific regulations for the directed Tanner crab fishery are applied during the subsequent Tanner crab opening.

Pot Limits and Legal Gear

In 1992, in an effort to slow the harvest rate, to allow sufficient time for inseason management of the Tanner crab fishery, the Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) adopted regulations which restricted all participating vessels to fishing a maximum of 250 pots. In 1993, to comply with federal law regarding application of pot limits in a nondiscriminatory manner, differential pot limits, based on vessel length, were implemented. Vessels less than or equal to 125 feet were and continue to be limited to a maximum of 200 pots. Vessels in excess of 125 feet were and continue to be limited to a maximum of 250 pots. Unlike the Bristol Bay king crab fishery, pot limits in the directed Tanner crab fishery cannot be adjusted because of a low GHL, nor are they affected by the number of vessels participating.

As part of the total number of pots, vessels are allowed to configure and fish a maximum of 20 pots for cod to use as bait. This pot limit is outlined in 5 AAC 35.525 (c)(4) and (d) **LAWFUL GEAR FOR REGISTRATION AREA J**. To ensure compliance with pot limit regulations, the main or trailer buoy on each (crab or cod bait) pot must display one fishery specific identification tag for the current year according to 5 ACC 35.526 (a) **TANNER CRAB POT MARKING REQUIREMENTS FOR REGISTRATION AREA J**. Tags are available at the Dutch Harbor and Kodiak offices for \$2.00 per tag.

Further regulations regarding pot marking can be found in 5 AAC 35.526 **TANNER CRAB POT MARKING REQUIREMENTS FOR REGISTRATION AREA J**. All pots must be tagged at the time of tank inspection and remain tagged throughout the fishery. The vessel operator is responsible for all tagged gear and insuring that tags are affixed to gear in a way to minimize tag loss.

A pot with a lost ADF&G issued buoy tag should be set back into the water with all doors secured open and all bait and bait containers removed. Fishers should immediately report, to Fish and Wildlife Protection, the exact location of the pot. Buoy tags lost during the season may be replaced according to the provisions of 5 AAC 35.526 (b) **TANNER CRAB POT MARKING REQUIREMENTS FOR REGISTRATION AREA J**. This regulation states that replacement tags are only issued if the vessel operator and three crew members submit sworn affidavits, in person, at the ADF&G office in Dutch Harbor describing how the tags were lost and listing the number of each lost tag.

According to statewide regulations, a legal Tanner crab pot is a pot that is no more than 10 feet long by 10 feet wide by 42 inches high with rigid tunnel eye openings that individually are no more than five inches in one dimension (current regulations under this section incorrectly state “*any one dimension*”) with tunnel eye opening perimeters that individually are more than 36 inches (91.4 cm) or a pot that is no more than 10 feet long by 10 feet wide by 42 inches high that tapers inward from its base to a top that consists of one horizontal opening of any size. A complete description of statewide Tanner crab gear requirements are set out in 5 AAC 35.050 **LAWFUL GEAR FOR TANNER CRAB**. Additional regulations, specific to the Bering Sea District Tanner crab fishery, stipulate that the tunnel eye openings on the vertical side of a Tanner crab pot may be no more than three inches high and all crab pots must have at least 1/3 of one vertical surface of the pot composed of not less than 7 ¼ inch stretched mesh webbing or have no less than 4 circular escape rings with an inside diameter of no less than five inches installed in the vertical plane to permit the escapement of undersized Tanner crabs as required by

5 AAC 35.525 (b) (1) **LAWFUL GEAR FOR REGISTRATION AREA J.** All pots must also be equipped with a biodegradable escape mechanism as described in 5 AAC 39.145 **ESCAPE MECHANISM FOR SHELLFISH AND BOTTOM FISH POTS.**

Registration, Tank Inspections and Gear Operations

In addition to vessel registration requirements with the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission listed under 5 AAC 39.120 **REGISTRATION OF COMMERCIAL FISHING VESSELS**, a vessel used to take Tanner crabs in the Bering Sea District must first obtain a shellfish registration certificate from the ADF&G according to the provisions of 5 AAC 35.020 **TANNER CRAB AREA REGISTRATION**. The Tanner crab registration year is August 1 through July 31. The annual preseason registration deadline which will take effect on July 1, 2000 is 5:00 p.m. October 10 as outlined in 5 AAC 35.506 (e) (3) **AREA J REGISTRATION**.

In order for a shellfish vessel registration to be valid, a vessel must first have all holds and/or live tanks inspected by an ADF&G representative as specified in 5 AAC 35.030 **INSPECTION REQUIREMENTS** and all gear must meet legal Tanner crab gear requirements (with the exception of up to 20 legally configured groundfish pots). Hold inspections are required to insure that vessels are not in possession of crabs prior to the start of the fishery. Vessels intending to participate in the Bering Sea Tanner crab fishery are required to register and have their holds inspected in Dutch Harbor, Akutan, Saint Paul, or King Cove beginning 24 hours prior to the start of the season according to provisions of 5 AAC 35.555 (b) **INSPECTION REQUIREMENTS FOR REGISTRATION AREA J**. In addition to the normal 24 hour tank inspection window, pre-tank and gear inspections are available to facilitate gear loading and expedite the registration validation process. ADF&G staff in all tank inspection ports, except Saint Paul, will begin inspecting holding tanks and gear on vessels up to seven days prior to the normal tank inspection period. If all gear on a vessel at the time of the pre-tank inspection is in compliance with registration area gear requirements, and all tanks are confirmed to contain no crabs, a pre-inspection certificate is issued to the operator of the vessel. Leaving port or placing gear on the vessel which is not in compliance with area registration gear requirements, invalidates the pre-inspection certificate and the vessel is required to undergo a regular tank inspection during the 24 hour tank inspection window.

During the normal tank inspection window, operators or interim-use card holders from vessels which have received a pre-tank and gear inspection may proceed, with their pre-tank certificate, vessel registration and interim use card for Registration Area J, Bering Sea District Tanner crab, to a pre-designated "Quick Registration" signing location to have their registrations validated. Quick Registration signing locations are announced during pre-tank inspections. Once a vessel's registration has been validated, the vessel is free to leave port and proceed to the fishing grounds. The pre-tank inspection and Quick Registration validation process greatly expedites tank inspections and normally enables the majority of the fleet to complete the registration validation process within one hour of the start of regular tank inspections. Vessels which have not undergone a pre-tank inspection must have their holds and gear inspected during the 24 hour tank inspection window.

United States Coast Guard (USCG) personnel now accompany ADF&G personnel during some tank inspections. USCG representatives review vessel stability requirements and certified letters

of stability to ensure the number of pots carried by a vessel does not exceed the vessel's stability requirements. Questions regarding USCG stability checks should be addressed to; Lieutenant Commander Steve P. McCleary, Marine Safety Detachment, USCG, Dutch Harbor, (907) 581-3468.

Landing and Pot Storage Requirements

For a fishing vessel participating in the directed Tanner crab fishery in the Eastern Subdistrict, the landing deadline is 24 hours following the fishery closure, except that an owner, or the owner's agent, of a vessel delivering to King Cove or ports east, may request additional time to deliver Tanner crabs by contacting a representative of the ADF&G office in Dutch Harbor. A reasonable amount of additional time will be provided to allow the vessel to proceed directly to the processing location. Additional information concerning landing requirements for Tanner crabs in the Bering Sea can be found in 5 AAC 35.556 LANDING REQUIREMENTS FOR AREA J.

To store pots legally, all doors must be secured open with bait and bait containers removed. In the Bering Sea District, Tanner crab pots may be stored in waters of the Eastern Subdistrict north of 57° N lat., south of 58° N lat., east of 166° W long., and west of 164° W long. and in depths of 25 fathoms or less, from January 1 through December 31. In years when there is a Bristol Bay red king crab fishery pots may be stored in waters of the Eastern Subdistrict east of 166° W long., in waters deeper than 25 fathoms for 10 days before the directed Tanner crab fishery opening date. Preseason pot storage is precluded from that portion of the Bristol Bay king crab management area between 166° and 168° W long. to reduce conflicts between stored crab gear and the rock sole trawl fleet operating in that area. Pots may be stored within the Eastern Subdistrict for up to seven days following the closure of the commercial Tanner crab fishery according to 5 AAC 35.052 (a) (2) (A) TANNER CRAB POT STORAGE REQUIREMENTS. Additional provisions of these regulations can be found in 5 AAC 35.527 TANNER CRAB POT STORAGE REQUIREMENTS FOR REGISTRATION J. In years when the Bristol Bay red king crab fishery fails to open, preseason gear storage in waters deeper than 25 feet is not allowed except provided in 5 AAC 35.527 (4)(B).

Legal Size Limits

Male Tanner crabs and hybrid Tanner crabs conforming to the identification criteria described in 5 AAC 35.521 (a) IDENTIFICATION OF BERING SEA TANNER CRAB must be five and one half inches (140 mm) or greater in the width of the shell to be retained according to 5 AAC 35.060 SIZE LIMIT FOR TANNER CRAB. All female and undersized male crabs must be immediately returned unharmed to the sea, as outlined in 5 AAC 35.065 FEMALE AND UNDERSIZE TANNER CRAB.

HARVEST STRATEGY

The harvest strategy developed for Bering Sea Tanner crabs, in accordance with provisions set out in 5 AAC 35.080 HARVEST STRATEGY, is outlined under 5 AAC 35.508 EASTERN SUBDISTRICT C. *BAIRDI* TANNER CRAB HARVEST STRATEGY. The BOF adopted this harvest strategy at the March 1999 meeting as part of a comprehensive Bering Sea Tanner crab rebuilding plan. The basic harvest strategy for the Eastern Subdistrict specifies a biological threshold of 21.0 million pounds of mature female biomass which, for management purposes, are defined to be female crabs ≥ 80 mm carapace width (CW). No commercial crab fishery is prosecuted when female biomass is below that threshold. When the mature female biomass is between 21.0 million but less than 45.0 million pounds a harvest rate of 10% is applied to “molting mature males”. When the mature female biomass is 45.0 million pounds or greater, the harvest rate is set at 20% of molting mature males. Molting mature males are defined as those male crabs which are likely to continue to grow and are 100% of new-shell and 15% of old-shell male crabs greater than 112 mm CW. In addition to the female biomass threshold, a minimum management threshold of 4.0 million pounds is necessary for a fishery to occur.

If the fishery is not opened because it did not meet the female biomass threshold requirement, the fishery may reopen the following season if the GHL is at least 8.0 million pounds and only half of the season’s GHL may be harvested. The fishery may reopen the second year following a closure if the GHL is at least 4.0 million pounds. These requirements were put in place to guard against an anomaly in the Eastern Bering Sea Trawl Survey. Separate GHLs are calculated for the areas east and west of 168° W longitude. If the GHL in either area is too low to manage effectively, the fishery can be closed in that area. The Tanner crab GHL for the Bering Sea District is calculated based on population estimates derived from the NMFS Eastern Bering Sea Trawl Survey. Survey results are presented annually in the Report to Industry on the Eastern Bering Sea Crab Survey.

FISHERIES MANAGEMENT AND VOLUNTEER CATCH REPORTING

The Bering Sea Tanner crab fishery is managed based on inseason voluntary catch reports from participating vessel operators. These reports, sent by means of marine satellite telex or over single side band radio, are processed by ADF&G staff in Dutch Harbor. Vessel operators report number of pots hauled and number of legal crabs harvested for a predetermined reporting period. The reporting period time interval and reporting times are predetermined based on the number of vessels participating and the size of the GHL. Inseason management allows the fishery manager to base management decisions on actual, real-time fishery performance and weather conditions. Inseason information is used to monitor the daily harvest and to calculate a daily catch rate used to project the date and time of the fishery closure. Once determined, the closure is announced to the fishing fleet over single side band radio (frequency 4125 kHz) and faxed or emailed to all major processors and industry groups. The operator of any validly registered vessel may participate in the voluntary inseason catch reporting program. All vessel operators are asked to participate in voluntary reporting at the time of tag purchase, registration, and/or tank inspection.

GUIDELINE HARVEST LEVEL AND OUTLOOK FOR THE 1999 FISHERY

Results from the 1999 NMFS Eastern Bering Sea Trawl Survey indicate that overall estimated Tanner crab abundance increased from levels observed in 1998. Estimated legal male abundance was low at 2.0 million crabs (4.4 million pounds), changing little from 1998. Estimated abundance of mature females increased to 16.1 million crabs (13.9 million pounds), a 147% increase over 1998. Pre-recruits increased to 14.5 million crabs, a 20% increase over 1998 (Stevens et al. 1999). Due to low stock abundance, the Bering Sea Tanner crab fishery will remain closed for the 1999 season.

DEPARTMENT CONTACTS

Contacts for ADF&G in Dutch Harbor are Rance Morrison (rance_morrison@fishgame.state.ak.us), Area Management Biologist; Forrest Bowers (forrest_bowers@fishgame.state.ak.us), Assistant Area Management Biologist; and Robert Gish (robert_gish@fishgame.state.ak.us), Crab CDQ and Groundfish Management Biologist. The ADF&G phone number in Dutch Harbor is (907) 581-1239; the fax number is (907) 581-1572.

Department contacts in Kodiak are Wayne Donaldson (wayne_donaldson@fishgame.state.ak.us), Regional Shellfish Biologist; Dave Jackson (dave_jackson@fishgame.state.ak.us), Kodiak Island/Alaska Peninsula Area Shellfish Management Biologist; and Mike Ruccio (mike_ruccio@fishgame.state.ak.us), Assistant Area Shellfish Biologist. The ADF&G phone number in Kodiak is (907) 486-1840; the fax number is (907) 486-1824.

LITERATURE CITED

Stevens, B.G, J.A. Haaga, and R.A. MacIntosh. 1999. Report to Industry on the 1999 Eastern Bering Sea Crab Survey. NMFS Processed Report 2000-01.

Table 1. Commercial harvest statistics, by season, for the Bering Sea Tanner crab fishery, 1969-1999.

Year	Number of			Harvest ^a (pounds)	Number of Pots		CPUE ^b	Deadloss (pounds)
	Vessels	Landings	Crab ^a		Registered	Pulled		
1969	NA	131	353,300	1,008,900		29,800	12	NA
1970	NA	66	482,300	1,014,700		16,400	29	NA
1971	NA	22	61,300	166,100		7,300	8	NA
1972	NA	14	42,061	107,761		4,260	10	NA
1973	NA	44	93,595	231,668		15,730	6	NA
1974	NA	69	2,531,825	5,044,197		22,014	115	NA
1974/75	28	80	2,773,770	7,028,378		38,462	72	NA
1975/76	66	304	8,956,036	22,358,107		141,206	63	NA
1976/77	83	541	20,251,508	51,455,221		297,471	68	NA
1977/78	120	861	26,350,688	66,648,954		516,350	51	218,099
1978/79	144	817	16,726,518	42,547,174		402,697	42	76,000
1979/80	152	804	14,685,611	36,614,315	40,273	488,434	30	56,446
1981	165	761	11,845,958	29,630,492	42,910	559,626	21	101,594
1982	125	791	4,830,980	11,008,779	36,396	490,099	10	138,159
1983	108	448	2,286,756	5,273,881	15,255	282,006	8	60,029
1984	41	134	516,877	1,208,223	9,851	61,357	8	5,025
1985	44	166	1,283,474	3,151,498	15,325	104,707	12	14,096
1986								
1987								
1988	98	248	897,059	2,210,394	38,765	112,334	8	10,724
1989	109	359	2,907,021	7,012,965	43,607	184,892	16	34,664
1990	179	1,032	10,717,924	24,549,299	46,440	711,137	15	87,475
1990/91	255	1,756	16,608,625	40,081,555	75,356	883,391	19	210,769
1991/92	285	2,339	12,924,034	31,796,381	85,401	1,244,633	10	279,741

-Continued-

Table 1. (Page 2 of 2)

Year	Number of		Harvest ^a (pounds)	Number of Pots		CPUE ^b	Deadloss (pounds)	
	Vessels	Landings		Crab ^a	Registered			Pulled
1992/93	294	2,084	15,265,880	35,130,866	71481	1,200,885	13	343,955
1993/94	296	862	7,235,498	16,891,320	116,039	576,464	13	258,389
1994	183	349	3,351,639	7,766,886	38,670	249,536	13	132,780
1995	196	256	1,877,303	4,233,061	40,827	247,853	8	44,508
1996 ^c	196	347	734,296	1,806,077	68,602	149,289	5	14,608
1997				NO COMMERCIAL FISHERY				
1998				NO COMMERCIAL FISHERY				
1999				NO COMMERCIAL FISHERY				

^aDeadloss included.

^bDefined as catch of legal crab per pot.

^cIncludes incidental catch with Bristol Bay red king crab and Tanner crab directed fishery totals.

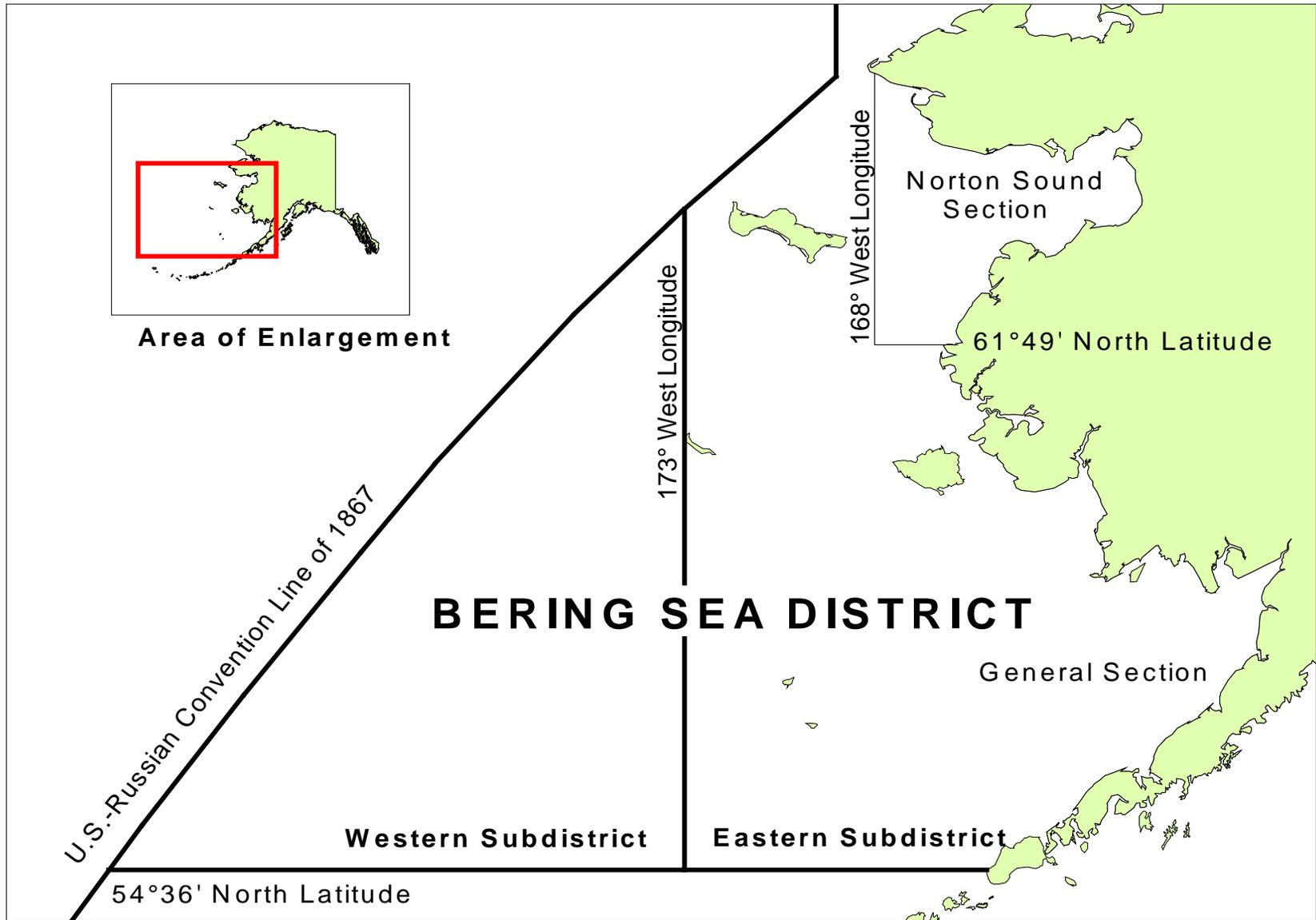


Figure 1. Bering Sea District of Tanner crab management area J showing subdistricts and sections.

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