



Advisory Announcement
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SITKA SOUND HERRING FISHERIES ANNOUNCEMENT

The 2024 Southeast Alaska Herring Sac Roe Fishery Management Plan is complete but will not be published prior to the start of the Sitka Sound herring sac roe fishery. Because of this, the following contains excerpts from the document that are most relevant to this year's Sitka fisheries.

SITKA SOUND SAC ROE HERRING FISHERY

The Sitka Sound sac roe fishing area encompasses the waters of Section 13-B north of the latitude of Aspid Cape, and in Section 13-A south of the latitude of Point Kakul in Salisbury Sound. The GHF for the 2024 Sitka Sound sac roe herring fishery is 81,246 tons with a forecasted average weight of 120 grams, including all forecasted age classes (3-8+). The GHF is based on a 20% harvest rate of the ASA forecast of 406,228 tons of mature herring biomass. This forecast is a 39% increase from the model estimate of the 2023 mature pre-fishery herring biomass of 292,669 tons and is greater than any prior forecast or estimate of spawning biomass for Sitka Sound herring. The magnitude of the 2024 forecast is largely the result of the 2023 model estimated pre-fishery herring biomass, which was much larger than the forecast and influenced in part by the unforeseen large size of the 2020-year class, producing the forecasted abundance of age-4 fish, and the continued high abundance of the large 2016-year class (age 8 fish in 2024). First observed as age-3 fish in 2023, the 2020-year class is the second largest ever estimated. The 2024 forecasted age composition (by numbers at age) for Sitka Sound is 2% age-3, 64% age-4, 4% age-5, 5% age-6, 1% age-7, and 24% age-8+.

Herring distribution and roe quality are monitored prior to and during fishing periods. Monitoring methods for 2024 will include aerial surveys, vessel sonar surveys, and test fishing. In 2024, the department will coordinate with industry vessels to conduct test fishing as necessary to determine the herring size and roe quality. Prior to making test sets, the identified test boats will contact department biologists who will monitor set locations and plan for transport of herring samples to a central location for analysis by industry technicians. The specific areas open to fishing will depend, in part, on the distribution of herring, the need to provide a reasonable opportunity for subsistence harvesters, and to provide for a fishery that will harvest good quality herring.

There is currently no agreement between the department and industry on the harvest strategy (i.e., competitive or noncompetitive fishery) for the 2024 fishery; however, it is likely that the fishery will be structured similarly to the previous 3 seasons as noncompetitive. Due to the large size of the GHF and a limited market, only a portion of the GHF is expected to be harvested. Additionally, limitations on processing and tending capacity will require multiple openings to harvest enough herring for market needs. The total daily processing capacities for the 2024 season will not be determined until immediately prior to the fishery, though it is expected to be approximately 2,000 tons per day. Harvest levels targeted for individual openings may vary in consideration of inseason assessments of herring distribution and quality, progress of the spawn, changes in available processing and tendering capacity, and input from industry representatives.

The department will hold a 2-hour notice meeting immediately prior to the fishery for reviewing the general guidelines and expectations, enforcement issues, and United States Coast Guard (USCG) safety concerns for the fishery. Additionally, at this meeting the department will review and discuss the herring assessment program, the results of the department's 2023

surveys and sampling, the 2024 forecast, and the harvest estimates for the 2023 herring roe on branch subsistence fishery. In order to maximize public participation this meeting will be held virtually. Details for this meeting will be announced through the department's advisory announcement system.

In recent years, the USCG has been closely monitoring fishery openings for violations of "Rules of the Road" during the conduct of the fishery. For further information regarding the application of "Rules of the Road" during the conduct of the fishery, contact the USCG Marine Safety Detachment at (907) 966-5454.

Operators of foreign vessels wanting to participate in the Sitka Sound herring sac roe fishery are encouraged to contact the National Marine Fisheries Service at (907) 747-6940 for more details on activities restricted by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

SUBSISTENCE OPPORTUNITY

The department will continue to manage the commercial sac roe fishery consistent with 5 AAC 27.195 and will ensure that the basis of management decisions is appropriately documented. The regulation requires that the department distribute the commercial harvest by fishing time and area if it determines that doing so is necessary to ensure a reasonable opportunity for subsistence users to harvest the amount of herring spawn necessary for subsistence uses. The regulation requires that the department consider the quality and quantity of herring spawn on branches, kelp, and seaweed, and herring sac roe when making management decisions regarding the subsistence herring spawn and commercial sac roe fisheries in Sitka Sound.

The department implements 5 AAC 27.195 by a number of methods including: observing the closure of the most commonly utilized traditional subsistence fishing areas to commercial fishing, directing commercial openings farther away from the closed areas when deemed necessary, assessing the amount of herring biomass returning to Sitka Sound during the fishing season, sampling herring inseason for size, sex, and maturity to direct the commercial fishery away from unmarketable fish, and implementing a more conservative harvest rate strategy in the commercial fishery. The department will continue to review and analyze whether these measures are adequate in providing for reasonable opportunity for subsistence users to harvest an amount of herring spawn necessary for subsistence, or if additional actions are warranted given the size and inseason distribution of the forecasted herring biomass. The department will document its decisions in a manner that — consistent with public records laws, regulations, departmental confidentiality, and privilege obligations— will permit third-party review.

Closed waters in Sitka Sound encompass approximately 16.5 square nautical miles (nmi) and encompass the "core subsistence area". In 2012, the Alaska Board of Fisheries (BOF) established 10 square nmi of closed waters for the Sitka Sound commercial herring sac roe fishery for the purpose of reducing conflict between commercial and subsistence users and to help ensure reasonable opportunity for subsistence users to harvest the amount necessary for subsistence. In 2018, the BOF expanded these closed waters by approximately 6.5 square nmi. If inseason surveys show that herring are abundant within or near the waters closed to the commercial sac roe fishery, the likelihood of herring spawning in the closed area is increased, the department will take such data into consideration when making management decisions consistent with 5 AAC 27.195.

The conservative nature of the harvest rate strategy (i.e., combination of sliding scale harvest rate and threshold) ensures that a substantial portion of the spawning biomass of herring is left unharvested and increases the likelihood that subsistence harvesters have a reasonable opportunity to harvest quality herring spawn. Because the harvest rate is reduced the closer the herring biomass forecast is to the threshold, and the fishery is closed below threshold, more protection is given to the herring stock at lower abundance levels, which is expected to enhance or maximize subsistence harvesters' reasonable opportunity when the herring stock size is smaller. The harvest rate strategy was first implemented in Sitka Sound in 1983. Specific harvest rate and threshold values were established in 1998 and revised in 2009 (Hebert 2021). Sitka Sound's harvest rate strategy has been considered conservative not only because an analysis determined that a fixed 20% harvest rate was sustainable at any stock level that is above a threshold based on 25% of estimated unfished biomass, but also because, as an extra precaution, it reduces the harvest rate on a sliding scale to 12% as the stock nears the threshold. The threshold, based on 25% of unfished biomass, was estimated to be 16,759 tons in 1998. However, to address subsistence concerns, the BOF established a threshold of 20,000 tons, which was 30% of unfished biomass. Due to additional concerns expressed by

subsistence users, the board raised the threshold again in 2012 to 25,000 tons (37% unfished biomass). Within this overarching harvest threshold and harvest level framework, the department will make time and area adjustments in the commercial fishery to maximize the quality of the herring, to avoid harvest beyond daily targets, and to prevent exceeding the established GHLL.

If the department determines that either a reasonable opportunity in the subsistence roe fishery will not be achieved through the implementation of existing regulations or that commercial activity will not permit adequate quality and quantity of subsistence roe harvest, then the department will make those adjustments in fishing time and area for the commercial fishery that it believes will provide a reasonable opportunity for the subsistence harvest of quality roe on branch, kelp, or seaweed. The department will meet these management directives, in part, by seeking out commercial harvest opportunities that are farthest from the waters closed to the commercial fishery that encompass core subsistence fishing areas. For example, if multiple commercial harvest opportunities are identified, the department will prioritize commercial harvest opportunities farthest from the commercial closed waters. Additionally, the department will implement discrete area closures in the vicinity of active herring spawn where it is evident there are subsistence roe on branch sets. The intent of these strategies is to reduce chances of disturbing herring schools located close to subsistence harvest areas to increase chances of herring spawning in those areas, and to increase the likelihood of quality subsistence harvests. The department will document its management decisions consistent with Alaska law, regulations, and department policies.

REGULATIONS

Commercial herring fishing regulations are included in the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's 2022–2024 Statewide Commercial Herring Fishing Regulations pamphlet. Copies of the pamphlet may be obtained at any department office. Management plans which apply harvest in the herring sac roe fisheries include: Management guidelines for commercial herring sac roe fisheries (5 AAC 27.059), Waters closed to herring fishing in Southeastern Alaska Area (5 AAC 27.150), Herring Management Plan for Southeastern Alaska Area (5 AAC 27.190), Sitka Sound commercial sac roe herring fishery (5 AAC 27.195), and Sections 1-E and 1-F commercial sac roe herring fishery (5 AAC 27.197).

In addition to waters closed to commercial herring fishing in Sitka Sound under state regulations, the federal waters around Makhnati Island are closed to commercial herring fishing activity. Department staff may be contacted for further details regarding commercial or subsistence herring regulations.

VESSEL CHECK-IN, CHECK-OUT, AND REPORTING PROCEDURE

Buyers or buyers' agents must register all vessels employed in transporting and processing herring with the department prior to commencing those activities and must make daily reports of herring purchased from fishermen as specified by a local representative of the department (5 AAC 27.162 [a]). The department requires that tenders and fishing vessels not previously registered through buyers or buyer's agents, check-in and check-out of the fishing areas with department personnel located on the fishing grounds to facilitate timely and complete assessment of herring landings.

Fish tickets must be provided to the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (CFEC) permit holder at the time of delivery to the first buyer or buyer's agent (5 AAC 27.162 [c]). This means there must be a separate fish ticket for each delivery to a tender before the tender leaves the fishing grounds. At the request of the CFEC permit holder, on-the-grounds weight and estimated roe content shall both be recorded on the fish ticket. Operators who transport fish out of Alaska before processing must submit a fish ticket to the department before departing the state (5 AAC 39.130 [c]). Fully completed fish tickets with updated accurate and final weights and roe percentages must be submitted to the department within 10 days after the termination of buying operations, unless otherwise specified by the department (5 AAC 27.162 [a][3]).

REPORTING PROCEDURES FOR FLOATING FISH PROCESSORS

Operators of floating fish processing vessels are required to report in person, by radio, or telephone, to the local department representative in the management area of intended operation before processing begins (5 AAC 39.130 [g]). The report must include the location and dates of intended operation.

ANNOUNCEMENT OF OPENINGS AND CLOSURES

Fishery openings and closures will be implemented through ADF&G emergency orders (EO). Fishery announcements will be announced through a combination of VHF radio and the Advisory Announcement system. The VHF radio channel for receiving field announcements will be indicated on the fishing grounds. Harvesters should expect short notifications of opening and closing times. Short notification is often necessary to provide fishing opportunities prior to major spawning and to maintain desired harvest levels.

The department will monitor herring distribution, abundance, and quality in advance of the expected fishery opening dates. Fisheries will be placed on short notice prior to the first opening. The short notice may be 1 to 2 hours at the discretion of the department. The department will try to give the industry a 36-hour notice of the time that the fishery goes on short notice. Announcement of the time that short notice goes into effect will be made by a department advisory announcement. However, if spawning is either earlier or heavier than anticipated, and waiting 36 hours could result in loss of fishing opportunity, notice will be less than 36 hours.

Advisory Announcement web site: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=cfnews.main>.

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<i>ADF&G</i>	225-5195	772-3801		747-6688	465-4250	766-2830	784-3255
<i>AWT</i>	225-5111	772-3983	874-3215	747-3254	465-4000	766-2533	784-3220