

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

NEWS RELEASE



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NORTON SOUND RED KING CRAB REGULATORY CHANGES

The Alaska Board of Fisheries met in Anchorage from March 17–20, 2015. Two proposals were submitted for the Norton Sound commercial red king crab fishery. At the meeting the department presented an oral report on the status of the Norton Sound commercial and subsistence red king crab fisheries. Both proposals addressed concerns with recent changes observed in the winter commercial fishery and were supported by the Northern and Southern Norton Sound Advisory Committees.

The proposals submitted and the board's decisions are listed below:

Proposal 269 - Incorporate the winter red king crab commercial fishery into existing commercial harvest strategy regulations. Proposal was amended to set a harvest allocation for the winter commercial fishery of 8% of the total commercial guideline harvest level (GHL). Proposal passed; 6-0.

Proposal 270 - Amend the winter red king crab commercial fishing season to a beginning date established by emergency order on or after January 15 and closing on April 30, unless extended by emergency order. Proposal passed; 6-0.

BACKGROUND: Under the federal management plan (FMP), the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) oversees the Norton Sound red king crab fishery and establishes the Allowable Biological Catch (ABC) and Over Fishing Limit (OFL) amounts for Norton Sound red king crab based on recommendations from a cooperative state and federal crab planning team (CPT). The Alaska Department of Fish and Game sets the GHL and manages the red king crab fishery. All red king crab harvest, including subsistence and all commercial fisheries, must remain below the ABC and, consequently the GHL must be below the ABC.

A recent increase in crab prices has led to an increasing number of permit holders participating in the winter commercial fishery. The surge in effort and prices has translated into record harvests and exvessel values, but has also resulted in substantial increases in pot losses as fishermen have started to

set crab pots both earlier and later in the season on less stable ice and have fished farther offshore on thin ice. The winter commercial fishery allocation of 8% reflects some of the recent growth in the winter fishery while avoiding increasing reductions to summer GHGs in order for all harvests to remain below the ABC. Adoption of proposal 270 ensures a later start to the winter commercial fishery and more closely aligns with the date the NPFMC sets the ABC and OFL. It also clarifies the department's authority to close the winter season early to minimize adverse impacts to the resource, such as the mortality to crab and other species from lost pots, also known as ghost fishing.

Many pots were lost last season during spring ice retreat. These losses may have been avoidable, but several fishermen chose to fish gear much later than ice conditions allowed. Spring break-up may occur earlier than average this season as was the case in 2014. Accordingly, the department may close the winter commercial fishing season May 1 in order to minimize late season pot losses. Commercial crabbers should stay tuned for further updates. For further information please contact the Nome ADF&G office at 907-443-5167 or 1-800-560-2271.