

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME

DIVISION OF COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

NEWS RELEASE



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WINTER RED KING COMMERCIAL FISHERY UPDATE

Regulations adopted by the Alaska Board of Fisheries in 2015 affecting the winter red king crab commercial fishery go into effect this season. Starting this season, the fishery is opened by emergency order on or after January 15 and closed on April 30 or earlier if necessary. Additionally, both winter and summer commercial fisheries are now combined under one red king crab harvest strategy. Under the new king crab management plan, the winter fishery is allocated 8% of the overall guideline harvest level. This January, the board also adopted a regulation setting pot limits and requiring pot tags for the commercial winter red king crab fishery. However, this regulation will not be implemented until the 2017 winter crab season. In 2017, commercial permit holders will be limited to 20 pots per permit holder and all pots must have individual pot tag numbers affixed to each pot's marking stake.

The Crab Planning Team (CPT) recently made recommendations for Norton Sound red king crab allowable biological catch (ABC) and over fishing limit (OFL) levels, as well as legal male biomass (LMB) estimates. Guideline harvest levels (GHLs) are set based on LMB and must be kept sufficiently below the ABC to accommodate all other sources of fishery-related mortality such as subsistence and personal use harvests. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) is anticipated to adopt ABC and OFL amounts for Norton Sound red king crab when they meet in early February.

It is anticipated that the NPFMC will approve an ABC of 570,000 pounds and an estimated LMB of 4.3 million pounds for 2016. Based on the recommended ABC, the department will implement a harvest rate of 12% for the commercial red king crab fishery yielding a total commercial GHL of 517,200 pounds. Total estimated harvest including the anticipated combined winter and summer subsistence harvest (10,000–20,000 pounds) is expected to be between 6–8% below the ABC. This management approach is consistent with the 2015 season when overall combined harvest (winter commercial+ summer commercial + subsistence) was approximately 11% below the ABC. Of the total GHL, summer and winter commercial fisheries are allocated 475,824 and 41,376 pounds, respectively. Any winter commercial harvest allocation not taken during the season will be added to the summer allocation. This level of commercial harvest allows a buffer of approximately 52,000 pounds to account for subsistence harvests, incidental mortality of non-target crab discards, as well as the

possibility that NPFMC will choose a lower ABC than expected. With no pot limits in effect this season for the winter fishery, there is also the potential to go over the winter allocation with the levels of fishing effort observed since the 2013 season. Considering current ice conditions throughout much of Norton Sound, increased pot losses and associated mortality of crab entrapped in derelict pot gear is also possible. Without pot limits in place, there is currently no way to reliably assess these impacts until after the season.

Like last season, nearshore ice conditions are unstable and have been particularly poor in the Nome area where the majority of winter commercial fishing effort occurs. If ice conditions improve, the department is tentatively planning to open the commercial winter red king crab fishery some time in February. Permit holders can begin registering for the fishery on Monday, February 1. Prior to the fishery starting, new entrants into the winter commercial fishery will need to have their pots inspected by department personnel to ensure they comply with escape mechanisms required in regulation. Finally, a reminder to permit holders that they must be present any time commercial pot gear is being operated, and can be assisted by licensed crew members. Crewmembers cannot deploy or operate gear on their own.

Permit holders are strongly encouraged to use extra prudence this season before deploying pot gear to minimize pot losses. An announcement will be made at a later date to confirm the exact opening date and time of the commercial fishery. Permit holders should stay tuned for further announcements. For further information please contact the Nome office at 907-443-5167 or 1-800-560-2271.