

Understanding the North Pacific Fishery Management Council Bering Sea Chinook salmon bycatch management measure action

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The North Pacific Fishery Management Council unanimously voted to limit the maximum number of Chinook salmon that can be taken in the Bering Sea pollock trawl fishery, by adopting a management program that includes strong incentives for the annual reduction of salmon bycatch at all levels of salmon abundance and encounters, through a package introduced by the State of Alaska.

The Council's action, adopted April 6, 2009, provides two options for pollock fleet: (1) fish under a lower cap level or (2) participate in a bycatch reduction incentive program and fish under a higher cap level.

(1) Cap of 47,591:

- A simple hard cap of 47,591 would be divided by season and sector. If a sector reaches its cap it would be prohibited from continuing to fish pollock for the remainder of the season.
- This is below the most recent 10-year average bycatch. Establishing 47,591 as a new upper limit would result in a significant reduction relative to historical bycatch.
- The consequence of fishery closure is expected to keep bycatch below a hard cap because in years when the cap would be constraining, vessels will avoid salmon rather than risk losing access to their allocation of pollock.

(2) Upper cap of 60,000 with bycatch reduction incentive program and 47,591 performance standard:

- Vessels may submit to National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) one or more private sector bycatch reduction incentive plan agreements (IPA) which, if approved would be subject to a higher hard cap of 60,000 Chinook salmon.
- The agreement(s) must demonstrate how management under the incentive plan will ensure vessels change behavior to avoid Chinook salmon bycatch in every season -- even when the total bycatch would be much less than the hard cap.
- Incentive plans are intended to manage bycatch below the upper limit, through rewards and penalties, based on each vessel's success in avoiding bycatch.
- Added flexibility of a higher cap is only provided as insurance for years of extraordinarily high salmon encounters. To reinforce the Council's intent that 60,000 is not a yearly target, the Council imposed a performance standard of 47,591. This performance standard functions as an effective cap.
- If a sector exceeds the 47,591 cap level in more than 2 years within a 7-year period, they will no longer have the option to fish under an incentive plan agreement and higher hard cap. The sector's cap will drop from 60,000 to their portion of the 47,591.
- Vessels that do not choose to fish under an IPA in a year when an IPA has been approved by NMFS will be limited to a proportion of a much lower ("opt-out") hard cap of 28,496. The tightly constrained opt-out fishery was designed to promote participation in an IPA.

The Council action recognizes salmon encounters in the pollock trawl fishery are highly variable. A hard cap alone may not be sufficient to promote salmon savings in low encounter years. More importantly, avoiding salmon at all levels of abundance protects weak stocks.

What is the North Pacific Fishery Management Council?

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is one of eight regional councils established by the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976 to oversee management of the nation's fisheries. With jurisdiction over the 900,000 square mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) off Alaska, the Council has primary responsibility for groundfish management in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands, including cod, pollock, flatfish, mackerel, sablefish, and rockfish species harvested mainly by trawlers, hook and line longliners and pot fishermen.

The Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game holds one of 11 voting seats on the Council. The Commissioner represents the State of Alaska at the Council. The Council has 5 other members from Alaska, representing commercial and recreational fisheries, fishing communities, and the general public.