

ALASKA BYCATCH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Report to Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang
November 2023

The Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council (BAC) was formed on March 10, 2023 to advise the ADF&G Commissioner of opportunities and provide advice on implementation of the recommendations provided by the Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force (ABRT). A link to the order creating the BAC is show below:

https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/bycatchtaskforce/abrt_commissioner_order1.pdf

Members of the BAC are:	Linda Kozak, Chair	John Jensen, Vice-Chair
	Brian Gabriel	Karma Ulvi
	Kevin Delaney	Stephanie Madsen

Assistance for all virtual meetings was given by ADF&G staff with special thanks to Kari Winkel, Art Nelson and the staff from board support.

Meeting Reports

Five virtual meetings were held in 2023 with all meetings open to the public and testimony was taken at every meeting. Attendance ranged from 40-70 individuals. Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker attended each meeting.

Complete meeting information is available at the following website:

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=bycatchtaskforce.meetinginfo>

Following is an abbreviated review of the five meetings held in 2023.

March 31, 2023

The first meeting was primarily organizational with election of chair, vice-chair, webinar information, a plan to create operating procedures, and to set spring meeting dates. It was determined that all meetings would be held in the spring and fall, with no meetings planned for June, July or August.

Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker provided an overview on some of the recommendations the state had already implemented and how more input was needed for state engagement.

May 1, 2023

The members of the BAC adopted an initial organizational plan and discussed a statement of purpose. A review of the recommendations from the ABRT was given and public comment was received on priorities that should be considered for various management recommendations,

May 1, 2023 Continued...

including chum salmon bycatch, subsistence concerns, bycatch utilization, Gulf of Alaska Tanner crab protections, observer coverage levels, and better ways to track and report bycatch. Additional testimony was received on how to improve the website and be a better conduit of information to the public.

The BAC discussion centered on state engagement recommendations, potential presentations for the next meeting, website accessibility, a draft mission statement, and how to develop Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Progress Reports on ABRT recommendations.

Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker provided a report on how the State of Alaska is providing for virtual and in-person meetings prior to each NPFMC meeting.

May 23, 2023

Following up on the desire for how to provide the public with better bycatch information, website navigation presentations were given by staff from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, National Marine Fisheries Service and Alaska Department of Fish & Game. The NOAA presentation link is shown below:

http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/bycatchtaskforce/052323_noaa_nmfs_web_nav.pdf

The draft Mission Statement was approved by the BAC and is shown below:

The Bycatch Advisory Council, working under the authority of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game Commissioner, will identify opportunities and provide advice to the Commissioner on implementation of recommendations provided by the Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force and other bycatch-related issues as directed by the Commissioner.

An announcement was given to the public that Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang and Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker were planning to travel to Kodiak in the fall for a bycatch townhall meeting. Testimony was given supporting this and suggestions for Homer and Cordova as other possible locations.

During the BAC discussion an idea was suggested for ADF&G to create an opinion piece regarding initiatives the state has supported with updates on bycatch management and information. It was noted that many members of the public do not know how to access accurate information and the state could assist in providing information to the public through the avenue of opinion pieces.

At this meeting a discussion was held regarding how research is organized and prioritized and ways the BAC could assist.

A subcommittee was formed to begin developing Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for the BAC website. John Jensen and Stephanie Madsen volunteered to begin that work during the summer and report back to the BAC.

It was suggested that the BAC begin tracking progress of ABRT recommendations and provide Progress Reports. Linda Kozak took the lead on this project.

Two fall meetings were set for September 5th and October 24th.

September 5, 2023

The meeting began with an announcement for the bycatch town hall meeting in Kodiak set for September 19th.

A second subcommittee was formed to monitor and provide website updates on research and Stephanie Madsen and Linda Kozak are taking the lead on this effort.

The public was encouraged to check back frequently for updates on the BAC calendar for upcoming meetings and other information. The “Hot Topics” section is also updated frequently.

Presentations were provided by State of Alaska personnel:

- Salmon Research – Dr. Katie Howard
- Crab Research – Dr. Ben Daly and Mark Stichert
- NPFMC/Management Update – Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker

Two of the presentations were verbal, while Dr. Howard provided a slide presentation. A link to that is shown below:

https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/bycatchtaskforce/090523_howard_salmon_research_update.pdf

A discussion was held by members of the BAC regarding the FAQ development and the public was encouraged to assist on what kind of information would be most helpful.

October 24, 2023

Announcements for the public were:

Progress Reports on ABRT recommendations in the areas of state engagement, research and management have been posted to the BAC website. These will be updated twice per year and will track progress made in these areas.

A Bycatch Utilization Subcommittee has been formed with BAC member Brian Gabriel as the chair. Other members of that subcommittee are Duncan Fields (harvester) and Chelsea Radell (processor). The Bycatch Utilization Committee will hold their first meeting on November 20th.

A second bycatch town hall meeting with Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang will be held in Homer on November 27th.

October 24, 2023 Continued...

Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker gave an overview of the bycatch townhall meeting in Kodiak where 65 members of the public attended. She reiterated how important public input is and how much it was appreciated and the state received some good suggestions and ideas. Comments were made about how the townhall meeting was civil, even though there was disagreement between various user groups.

Presentations on research were made by Dr. Ed Farley, chair of the Alaska Salmon Research Task Force and Scott Goodman, executive director of the Bering Sea Fisheries Research Foundation. Links to those presentations are shown below:

[Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force \(ABRT\) Reference Library, Alaska Department of Fish and Game](#)

The BAC members discussed the FAQ section and committed to finalizing this before the end of the year. There are 15 questions that need some refinement and then work will be done to provide answers.

Following public comment, the BAC members reviewed spring meeting dates and the first meeting is set for March 26th with a May meeting yet to be scheduled. Discussions about presentation topics were held and it was agreed that updates on NPFMC activity on bycatch as well as an update from the Bycatch Utilization subcommittee were needed. There was general support for the idea of bycatch townhall meetings and support was given for more opportunities in other communities across the state.

Subcommittee Membership and Website Activity in 2023

Subcommittees formed as of November 2023:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| ➤ <i>Frequently Asked Questions</i> | <i>John Jensen and Stephanie Madsen</i> |
| ➤ <i>Research Monitoring</i> | <i>Stephanie Madsen and Linda Kozak</i> |
| ➤ <i>Bycatch Utilization</i> | <i>Brian Gabriel, Chair, Duncan Fields (harvester),
Chelsea Radell (processor)</i> |

State of Alaska ABRT/BAC Website:

An overview of the ABRT and BAC, along with membership is available on the website along with meeting information for all BAC meetings, including agenda, meeting minutes and audio is posted to the website.

A calendar of upcoming meetings of interest is frequently updated.

The Reference Library has five categories of information at present:

1. Links: NOAA and NPFMC websites providing bycatch information
2. FAQs (still under development)
3. Hot Topics: Final ABRT report, news and meeting notices
4. Presentations: All BAC presentations are posted
5. Progress Reports: Action updates on ABRT recommendations for state engagement, research and management

PROGRESS REPORTS

Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force Recommendations

Prepared by Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council
Fall 2023

State Engagement Recommendations

Recommendation: Establish a process for providing bycatch-related information and resources that is understandable and easily accessible.

Progress:

1. *Continued development of a bycatch website to provide upcoming meeting information, presentations and links to sites of interest.*
2. *Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are being developed for bycatch website.*
3. *Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council (BAC) virtual meetings provided presentations on how to access bycatch information at the NPRMC, NMFS and state levels, as well as updates on state engagement, research and management actions.*
4. *Future BAC meetings will provide updates on ABRT recommendations and other bycatch information.*

Recommendation: Offer the public an opportunity to provide input on NPFMC issues before each NPFMC meeting.

Progress:

1. *State officials meet virtually and in person with Alaskan stakeholders before each NPFMC meeting.*
2. *Deputy Commissioner attends Bycatch Advisory Council meetings and testimony is taken at each meeting on bycatch issues.*
3. *ADF&G Commissioner initiated a series of townhall meetings on bycatch.*

Recommendation: Create a permanent bycatch advisory entity.

Progress: ADF&G Commissioner established the Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council and made it effective for three years. Council will meet four times per year and provide reports to the Commissioner on recommendations and progress. Presentations and information will be provided via the State of Alaska BAC website. A link is shown below:

<https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=bycatchtaskforce.meetinginfo>

Recommendation: Support legislative action to remove the sunset of the Education Tax Credit Program and expand to allow for gear modification or technology improvements that help reduce bycatch.

Progress: The Alaska State Legislature is reviewing this action. House Bill 144 is currently in House Finance and Senate Bill 120 is in Senate Finance. It is anticipated this legislation will be addressed and finalized in the 2024 legislative session.

Recommendation: Work with other entities to improve information on the bycatch of Chinook and chum salmon taken in Russian domestic fisheries.

Progress: The State of Alaska continues to urge the State Department to provide accountability through observers or other means to determine Chinook and chum take by Russian vessels.

Recommendation: Develop a State of Alaska Bycatch Policy.

Progress: This issue has not yet been addressed.

Research Recommendations

NOTE: Following is a summary of research recommendations with an update on progress. A detailed report on research recommendations is included in the final ABRT report available for review at the following link:

https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/bycatchtaskforce/abrt_final_report.pdf

General Recommendations for Process in Developing Research Priorities:

1. Develop state bycatch research priorities, utilizing input from communities, Alaska Native tribes, industry, and the public, to share with funding entities that would help identify and acquire research funds.
2. Implement strategies to encourage and facilitate industry/agency cooperative research to reduce bycatch and associated mortality.

3. Create methods for collaboration with Alaska Native tribes, organizations and other research entities to better track proposed or funded bycatch research, along with developing opportunities for cooperative projects and combined reporting of findings.

Progress: The State of Alaska is actively working with Tribes, communities, industry, and the public to receive input and inform on bycatch research projects.

Three specific recommendations were made by all of the committees and applies to all regions and gear groups:

Recommendation: Fund and support gear modification research for all gear types to reduce incidental take of Chinook and chum salmon, crab and halibut, as well as discard mortality.

Progress: Industry is actively engaged in gear modification research to avoid incidental take of Chinook and chum salmon. This includes trawl design, lights and real-time hot spot reporting in efforts to avoid areas with large concentrations of salmon.

Recommendation: Discard mortality rate studies are needed in all regions, species and gear groups.

Progress: ADF&G scientists are investigating ways to better determine assumed discard mortality rates. It is understood that the rates used now are conservation-based and are higher than what is actually believed.

Recommendation: Additional survey work is needed, along with tagging studies for crab and halibut.

Progress:

1. Surveys and stock assessments continue to be a high priority with National Marine Fisheries Service, International Pacific Halibut Commission and Alaska Department of Fish & Game. Funding continues to be an issue for increased survey work. Survey net design modifications are also being addressed.
2. Winter crab tagging studies in the Bering Sea are in progress in an industry/agency joint study. Additional tagging studies are ongoing in the halibut survey work by the International Pacific Halibut Commission.

Specific Recommendations by Species

Salmon Research

NOTE: A full report on Bering Sea salmon bycatch research was presented to the BAC on September 5th. This report highlights ABRT research recommendations. A link is shown below:

https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/bycatchtaskforce/090523_howard_salmon_research_update.pdf

Recommendation: Research to improve our ability to determine the stock of origin of chum and Chinook salmon taken as bycatch.

Progress:

1. *Funding was established several years ago to conduct juvenile salmon surveys in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea for chum and Chinook salmon and determine genetic origin. This survey work continues.*
2. *A Western Alaska Chinook salmon tagging and species model is under development. More information can be found at:*

<https://alaskapublic.org/2023/10/10/amid-western-alaska-salmon-crisis-data-driven-strategies-could-reduce-chinook-bycatch/>

Recommendation: Research to reduce bycatch through improved understanding of distribution and migration of Western Alaska chum and Chinook salmon stocks migration patterns to better predict and therefore avoid bycatch “hot spots” in the BSAI region.

Progress: Industry is working with agencies to develop technology and reporting to avoid bycatch hot spots in the Bering Sea.

Crab Research

Recommendation: Address observed and unobserved mortality caused by gear interactions.

Progress:

1. *The Crab Plan Team has identified this research as a priority. An inter-agency work group is meeting in late 2023 to address this issue and public participation meetings are planned.*
2. *Assumed discard mortality rates are also considered a research priority, but there is a lack of funding and staff availability currently to take on this project. Assumed rates are now set at a conservative level and not considered a conservation concern.*

Recommendation: Continued research on critical crab habitat to better inform on open and closed areas for commercial fishing activity.

Progress:

1. *Winter tagging studies have been funded and conducted in a joint effort by ADF&G and Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers to determine seasonal crab movement.*
2. *A workshop was conducted on October 2, 2023 to review data to determine if trawl performance standards are enforceable and if not, what solutions might be considered. More information can be found at:*

<https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=b893850c-75fa-4004-998a-52e1f782bed5.pdf&fileName=Trawl%20Performance%20Standard%20Workshop%20Summary.pdf>

3. ADF&G is working to research preferred habitat of crab at various life stages.

Halibut Research

Recommendation: Investigate better ways to estimate total removals and discard mortality.

Progress: This initiative was recommended by Internal Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) staff and continues to be a priority.

Other Recommendations:

- a) Research Gulf statistical areas to update/revise closed areas for trawling.
- b) Impacts of fish gear types on halibut habitat.
- c) Increase tagging studies to better understand movement between areas.
- d) Investigate halibut diet and growth rate to better understand changes in length at age.
- e) Studies on size limit and trade-offs (ongoing at IPHC and report due in October 2022).
- f) Determine relative fecundity of halibut based on size and age, and estimate impact on halibut stock of removals from all sources.

Progress:

1. Increased tagging continues to be a priority in the annual IPHC halibut survey work.
2. Halibut diet and growth rates continued to be studied by the IPHC scientists.
3. In 2022 the IPHC staff conducted a study on the size limit which was presented at the annual 2023 meeting. No action was taken to reduce or eliminate the size limit for the commercial fishery.
4. Additional informing research on genetic composition and origin of halibut is being conducted by staff of the International Pacific Halibut Commission.
5. At the October 2023 NPFMC meeting, the Council requested the Interagency Halibut DMR Workgroup to review methods used to estimate halibut mortality with a particular focus on marine mammal feeding on discards. This Workgroup is comprised of staff from the International Pacific Halibut Commission, North Pacific Fishery Management Council and National Marine Fisheries Service.

Management Recommendations

Recommendation: The State of Alaska should support taking incremental measures through the regulatory process to improve bycatch utilization with a particular focus on species that are otherwise marketable but are caught with non-targeted gear, or discards in a directed fishery that are required by regulation.

Progress:

1. *The Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council has established a working group to investigate the logistical, regulatory, economic, and political issues that would need to be addressed. An emphasis will be on high value species. Reports will be provided to the Council in 2024.*
2. *The North Pacific Fishery Management Council approved a motion at the October 2023 meeting to support a discussion paper by National Marine Fisheries Service concerning management of the maximum retainable amount regulations. The approved motion is shown below:*

<https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=a0f8d725-3df1-4ff7-bd61-9636b39a33a4.pdf&fileName=E%20Council%20Motion%20MRA.pdf>

Gulf of Alaska Fixed Gear

Recommendation: Following gear modification research, consider regulations for the directed crab fishery and pot cod fishery to reduce incidental take and discard mortality.

Progress: *While industry continues to experiment with various gear modifications to reduce incidental take and discard mortality, no regulations have been recommended.*

Recommendation: Address the lack of monitoring in the directed Tanner crab and state waters pot cod fisheries.

Progress: *The State of Alaska will be introducing legislation to the Alaska State Legislature in 2024 to allow for the use of electronic monitoring on vessels fishing in state managed fisheries.*

Gulf of Alaska Trawl Gear

Recommendation: Review the open and closed areas in the Gulf of Alaska for pelagic and non-pelagic trawl gear and consider closing new/additional areas to reduce the bycatch of halibut, salmon and Tanner crab.

Progress: *NPFMC initiated a discussion paper to review protective action for Tanner crab in the Kodiak area. This is scheduled for review at the December 2023 NPFMC meeting.*

Recommendation: To better quantify removals of prohibited species, it is recommended that trawl catcher vessels in the Gulf of Alaska be required to have 100% observer coverage when engaged in non-pelagic trawling. It is further recommended that the State of Alaska work to obtain funding, either through specific appropriations and/or grants for the additional coverage.

Progress: *This action has not yet been initiated.*

Recommendation: It is recommended that a regulatory requirement be approved for the Gulf of Alaska pelagic trawl fleet, including any tenders of pelagic trawl caught fish, to have 100% electronic monitoring. It is further recommended that the State of Alaska work with National Marine Fisheries Service, our federal delegation, and others to work to acquire funding to install electronic monitoring equipment on all GOA catchers and tenders.

Progress: This action has not yet been initiated.

Recommendation: It is recommended the State of Alaska propose that the North Pacific Fishery Management Council consider development of an abundance-based management program for halibut bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska as a way to address bycatch during fluctuations of halibut biomass.

Progress: This action has not yet been initiated.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the State of Alaska investigate the value of requiring full retention of Tanner crab in all GOA trawl fisheries for a period of time to adequately assess removals.

Progress: This action has not yet been initiated.

Recommendation: As a means of reducing and managing bycatch and associated mortality of high value species within the Gulf of Alaska, it is recommended that rationalization-type management tools be considered.

Progress: This action has not yet been initiated.

Bering Sea Fixed Gear

Recommendation: Evaluate possible seasonal closures in hot spot areas for pot gear both inside and outside of state managed waters.

Progress: NPFMC initiated an analysis to consider closures of the red king crab savings area for federally managed pot gear. This is scheduled for Initial Review at the February 2024 NPFMC meeting.

Recommendation: Consider a rationalization program for the 60' and greater pot cod vessels as a way to manage bycatch and examine prohibited species caps as part of a rationalization program.

Progress: The North Pacific Fishery Management Council is considering a cooperative type of rationalization program for this fleet. A discussion paper is scheduled for the June 2024 meeting.

Recommendation: Evaluate the observer coverage and monitoring for the directed crab and pot cod fisheries.

Progress: The State of Alaska will be introducing legislation to the Alaska State Legislature in 2024 to allow for the use of electronic monitoring on vessels fishing in state managed fisheries.

Recommendation: Examine the impact of retaining all legal crab in the directed crab fishery and counting toward IFQ.

Progress: This action has not yet been initiated.

Bering Sea Trawl Gear

Recommendation: Establish a scientific-based chum salmon cap to reduce bycatch in the pollock fishery in the Bering Sea.

Progress:

1. *NPFMC initiated an analysis on development of a chum cap at the April 2023 meeting.*
2. *In October 2023 the NPFMC reviewed a preliminary analysis and refined alternatives for review. Links are shown below with the Council motion and a public notification regarding the action. A first review of the impact analysis will be in mid-2024 with final action scheduled for December 2024.*

<https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=399d2901-eed2-49f3-b416-006a3b025113.pdf&fileName=C4%20Council%20Motion%20Chum%20Salmon%20Bycatch.pdf>

<https://www.npfmc.org/action-on-chum-bycatch/>

Recommendation: Review effectiveness of fixed open and closed areas for trawling and continue to examine methods to develop flexible spatial management.

Progress: The North Pacific Fishery Management Council is considering action to close the red king crab savings area to all groundfish gear. Initial Review for this issue is scheduled for the February 2024 NPFMC meeting.

Recommendation: The State should work to achieve real time genetic reporting that provides the composition of Western Alaska salmon in the bycatch. This can then be used in management of the pollock fishery to avoid areas and times when Western Alaska salmon are on the grounds in the Bering Sea.

Progress: Industry research continues to work on the development of real time genetic reporting.

Recommendation: A review is recommended for the Bering Sea trawl area prohibited species caps (PSC) in relation to crab to be supported by the State of Alaska. This review would examine the impacts to the resource and trawl sector if trawl crab PSC were to be applied across the entire Bering Sea area, instead of only the current sub-areas.

Progress: This action has not yet been initiated.