

North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) update for Alaska Board of Fisheries work session

Submitted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game
 October 20, 2015

Bering Sea Chinook salmon bycatch action (April 2015)

- Chinook salmon bycatch has been relatively low (12,000 – 18,000 fish) compared to historical levels and compared to the current caps (dual cap system of 47,591 and 60,000) under the Amendment 91 program implemented in 2011.

Year	Chinook bycatch	chum bycatch
2006	82,695	308,431
2007	121,770	87,317
2008	21,480	14,834
2009	12,369	45,325
2010	9,697	12,754
2011	25,499	187,666
2012	11,344	22,075
2013	13,034	124,747
2014	15,031	216,994
2015*	18,000	237,000

* through 10/10/15

- Chinook genetics: Alaska-origin stocks comprised 77% of the total Chinook salmon bycatch samples in 2013 (most recent season analyzed), similar to previous years. The coastal Western Alaska stock grouping continues to dominate the Bering Sea Chinook salmon bycatch sample (50%), with smaller contributions from Middle/Upper Yukon (7%), British Columbia (16%), North Alaska Peninsula (14%), and West Coast US (7%) stocks. Upper Yukon stocks occurred primarily during the A season, NW GOA stocks occurred primarily during the B season, and coastal WAK stocks were distributed evenly between the two seasons.
- Chum genetics: Analysis of 2013 Bering Sea chum salmon genetic samples showed that Asian stocks continue to dominate the bycatch (60%), with smaller contributions from Eastern Gulf of Alaska/Pacific Northwest (15%), western Alaska stocks (18%), and Upper/Middle Yukon River (6%).
- Salmon avoidance measures used by the pollock fleet include sharing of real-time bycatch information (which requires 100% and 200% observer coverage), a hot-spot closure program which moves vessels away from areas of high bycatch inseason, penalties for high bycatch rates, use of salmon excluders, test tows, and operational changes that focus pollock fishing at times of year that typically have lower bycatch rates, at the expense of higher value pollock.

- The fundamental structure of the program is a system to keep bycatch low in all conditions of salmon and pollock abundance and not to exceed the lower cap. However, there was evidence that stronger incentives and penalties were needed and a desire by the State to lower caps in times of historically low salmon abundance in Western Alaska.
- The Council's April 2015 motion:
 - Incorporates chum salmon bycatch avoidance measures into the incentive plans currently used to control Chinook salmon bycatch, to create a comprehensive salmon bycatch avoidance plan.
 - Requires stronger incentives and penalties be included and requires the use of salmon excluders with few exceptions.
 - The most significant change to the program is the use of a Chinook salmon abundance index to lower bycatch caps in the year following low salmon abundance.
- Regulations for this action are expected to be implemented by NOAA in 2016.

Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands halibut bycatch action (June 2015)

- The bycatch limits for the federal trawl and longline groundfish fisheries are set in federal regulation and authority to change them resides with the Council. In contrast, the International Pacific Halibut Commission (IPHC) has the authority to set the biological parameters for the halibut fishery and the commercial halibut fishery limits.
- Bycatch limits are fixed and overall halibut exploitable biomass has declined, so bycatch now accounts for ~78% of the total halibut removals in Area 4CDE (the Bering Sea); while the commercial halibut fishery allocations have decreased to about 22% of the total halibut removals in 4CDE.
- In June, the Council reduced halibut bycatch limits by 25% for the bottom trawl sector, by 20% for the CDQ sector, and by 15% for all other sectors. This action is expected to constrain the amount of bycatch taken in the bottom trawl sector and prevent substantial increases in halibut bycatch for other sectors.
- Overall, this is a 21% reduction in all bycatch limits combined and a 17% reduction in use of halibut by the bottom trawl sector. It is a total halibut mortality savings of about 800,000 lbs compared to 2014. Regulations for this action will be implemented by NOAA in 2016.
- This action was seen by the Council as a first step and the longer-term goal is an approach in which both bycatch and directed removals of halibut are indexed to halibut abundance. The Council will review a discussion paper on a possible approach in December and will further coordinate with the IPHC to attempt to manage the halibut resource for all users.

GOA trawl bycatch management (October 2015)

- Council has been working for the past three years to develop a trawl bycatch management program for the Gulf of Alaska. Currently the GOA trawl fisheries are open access, competitive fisheries, subject to some constraining bycatch limits.
- Purpose is to allocate bycatch species limits (e.g., halibut bycatch and Chinook salmon bycatch) and/or target species quota (e.g., pollock, Pacific cod, etc) to voluntary cooperatives, in order to mitigate the impacts of a race for fish. Cooperatives facilitate a coordinated effort among vessels to fish and avoid bycatch; allow vessels and processors to take advantage of planning, gear modifications, information sharing, and risk pooling to optimize fishing. Council adopted two action alternatives in October 2014 for analysis.
- Council adopted a new alternative in October 2015 to be included in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) being developed for this action. The new alternative establishes bycatch cooperatives for the trawl catcher vessel sector with only bycatch limits apportioned to cooperatives; no target species quota is included. (The other action alternatives remain in the package, which include allocations of target species.) There are several additional differences in the new alternative compared to the others:
 - Provides options for greater reductions in the Gulf of Alaska halibut bycatch limits.
 - Allows vessels to voluntarily join a cooperative with any processor on an annual basis. No regulation that links a vessel to a particular processor to which they have delivered historically for any period.
 - Bycatch is allocated to the cooperatives on either an equal shares basis or by vessel capacity. Mirrors the two ways voluntary (unregulated) cooperative efforts have been structured in the GOA.
 - If a vessel does not want to join a cooperative, there is an option to take a reduced amount of bycatch and fish on their own.
 - Limits the amount of bycatch that can be annually transferred within a cooperative or between cooperatives, in order to limit consolidation.
 - No community fisheries association included.
- Still early in process. Staff analysis and public input will continue during 2016. The Department will continue to update the Board as work progresses and provide the Board with some options to consider modifying State regulations governing the parallel fishery that may be necessary to continue a smooth transition between state and federal waters when management in federal waters changes.

Aleutian Islands Pacific cod fishery (October 2015)

- Council action in October 2015 to only allow catcher vessels to prosecute the AI Pacific cod fishery in federal waters until March 15, with a regional delivery requirement to deliver to shoreplants west of 170° longitude until that date. Prioritizes the inshore fishery at levels up to 5,000 mt (11 mlbs) of Pacific cod.
- Many provisions included to reduce risk of unharvested Pacific cod TAC.

- After March 15, or earlier at higher TAC levels, the offshore sectors can participate.
- Federal regulations not likely until at least 2017.