



Advisory Announcement

For Immediate Release: December 20, 2023

CONTACT: Martin Schuster and Andy Pollak
Groundfish Area Management Biologists
(907) 235-8191

Prince William Sound and Cook Inlet Areas **2024 Central Region Groundfish Fisheries Outlook**

Emergency Orders # 2-GF-H-01-24 and # 2-GF-E-01-24

General

This annual advisory announcement provides a brief overview of Prince William Sound Area (PWS) and Cook Inlet Area (CI) commercial groundfish fishing opportunities for the 2024 calendar year.

Fishers, processors, and buyers must adhere to current Statewide Commercial Groundfish Fishing Regulations available online at: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=fishregulations.commercial> or from Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) offices in Homer, Cordova (907-424-3212), Anchorage (907-267-2104), and Soldotna (907-262-9368). Contact the Homer office with groundfish regulatory and registration questions (907-235-8191).

To land groundfish or halibut, an individual must possess a gear-specific, valid Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (CFEC) interim-use or limited entry permit card. In addition, all vessels operating gear for groundfish must possess a valid fishery-specific area registration from ADF&G. A vessel may be registered for only one groundfish registration area at a time and must check-out of an area prior to registering for another area. Check-out is accomplished by contacting the Homer ADF&G office during regular business hours and, depending on the fishery, there may be additional requirements listed on the registration form. Cook Inlet Area or Prince William Sound Area registrations may be obtained in person from ADF&G offices in Homer, Cordova, Anchorage, Soldotna, and Kodiak. A fisher must possess the appropriate CFEC permit card to register for PWS and CI groundfish fisheries. To register by fax or email, contact the Homer area office.

Allowable bycatch levels for groundfish species are set by Emergency Order (EO) and are listed below under the species headings for each respective management area. In both PWS and CI, all rockfish must be retained, and any rockfish bycatch in excess of the allowances listed below, must be weighed and reported on the fish ticket, by species, as an overage. Proceeds from overages are paid to the State of Alaska. The commissioner may, by EO, close and immediately reopen a season in which the bycatch limit for any species is adjusted.

The department has growing concerns about the status of rockfish stocks. The rockfish Guideline Harvest Level (GHL) in PWS was exceeded in 2022 and 2023. The rockfish GHL has not been exceeded in CI in recent years. To stay within the 2023 annual PWS rockfish GHL the department reduced rockfish bycatch limits, did not reopen the parallel Pacific cod season, and sought emergency authority from the Board of Fisheries (BOF) to close areas to commercial fishing with specific gear types by emergency order. The department is seeking the assistance of participants in directed groundfish and halibut fisheries to set gear away from areas of known rockfish abundance and is considering pursuing additional regulatory management measures to control rockfish bycatch. Voluntary measures taken to aid in the conservation of rockfish are greatly appreciated and may have a positive effect on future opportunities.

Octopus may be retained as bycatch to directed PWS and CI groundfish fisheries up to 20% by weight of the directed groundfish harvest on board the vessel. Octopus will be closed to retention when the guideline harvest level (GHL) of 35,000 lb is achieved in each respective area. In PWS, octopus may not be retained by vessels using jig gear. See the octopus management plans for CI (5 AAC 38.360) and PWS (5 AAC 38.217) for additional information.

When a directed season is open for Pacific cod or walleye pollock, there are regulations for improved retention and improved utilization (IR/IU) of groundfish. Statewide regulation 5 AAC 28.070 (e) requires that a permit holder shall retain:

(1) all Pacific cod brought on board a vessel when a directed fishery for Pacific cod is open and all Pacific cod brought on board a vessel up to the maximum retainable bycatch allowance of Pacific cod when a directed fishery for Pacific cod is closed;

(2) all walleye pollock brought on board a vessel when a directed fishery for walleye pollock is open and all walleye pollock brought on board a vessel up to the maximum retainable bycatch allowance of walleye pollock when a directed fishery for walleye pollock is closed.

Under 5 AAC 28.075, a processor or processor's agent that purchases groundfish shall accept delivery of all Pacific cod and walleye pollock retained by the vessel under 5 AAC 28.070 (e).

Non-pelagic trawl gear may not be used to target groundfish in PWS or CI.

All groundfish species or fisheries not specifically mentioned in this document will be managed via the miscellaneous groundfish commissioner's permit requirements specified in PWS regulation 5 AAC 28.220 or CI regulation 5 AAC 28.379.

Anyone intending to fish in federal waters, further than 3 nautical miles (nmi) from shore, should contact the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for information prior to fishing.

Area NMFS Offices

| | | | | | |
|---------|--------------|---------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| Homer: | 907-235-2337 | Seward: | 907-224-5348 | Anchorage: | 907-271-5006 |
| Kodiak: | 907-481-1780 | Juneau: | 907-586-7228 | | |

State regulation 5 AAC 28.055 adopts by reference federal regulations at 50 CFR 679.24 (e), which require seabird avoidance measures (SAM) in all longline fisheries for groundfish and halibut in state waters except the Inside District of PWS and the Cook Inlet District of the Cook Inlet Area. Go to: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/bycatch/seabird-avoidance-gear-and-methods> for additional information.

All vessels participating in a parallel groundfish fishery, except those using jig or hand troll gear, must have a NMFS-approved vessel monitoring system (VMS). For additional information, see the NOAA website: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/enforcement/regional-vessel-monitoring-information>.

NMFS continues to implement the North Pacific Groundfish and Halibut Observer Program. Information and frequently asked questions on the observer program can be found at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/fisheries-observers/north-pacific-observer-program> or by contacting the NMFS Sustainable Fisheries Division in Juneau at (907) 586-7228.

Prince William Sound Area

Prince William Sound Area (PWS; 5 AAC 28.200): all waters of Prince William Sound and waters of Alaska bounded on the west by the longitude of Cape Fairfield (148° 50.25' W. long.) south to the latitude of Cape Douglas (58° 51.10' N. lat.), then west to 149° 00.00' W. long., then south along 149° 00.00' W. long., and on the east by 144° 00.00' W. long. (Figure 1).

PWS Inside District: All waters of PWS enclosed by lines from Pt. Whithed to Pt. Bentinck, Cape Hinchinbrook to Zaikof Pt., and Cape Cleare to Cape Puget.

PWS Outside District: All waters of PWS that are seaward of the Inside District are divided into two sections:

Eastern Section: waters of the PWS Outside District between 147° 00' W. long. and 144°00' W. long.

Western Section: waters of the PWS Outside District west of 147° 00' W. long.

Groundfish fishing closures related to Steller sea lion conservation include waters surrounding two rookeries in PWS, Seal Rocks and Wooded Island (Fish Island) (Figure 2). Directed commercial fishing for groundfish is closed to all gear types within 3 nmi of each of these rookeries. For specific regulatory language describing the closure areas, contact NMFS in Kodiak at (907) 481-1780 or consult the website at: <https://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/fisheries/sslpm>.

Regulation 5 AAC 28.230 (j) prohibits a vessel from having more than one type of gear on board when participating in a groundfish fishery, with the exception of mechanical jigging machines and hand troll gear, which are both considered jig gear for management purposes.

The Prince William Sound Science Center (PWSSC) has acoustic receiver moorings set in PWS. Moorings are located near Hinchinbrook entrance, Montague Strait, the southwest passages (Latouche, Elrington, Prince of Wales, and Bainbridge), Canoe Pass/Cedar Bay, Red Head, Gravina, Glacier Island, NW Montague Strait (3 moorings), and Knight Island Passage (2 moorings). Maps are provided to pollock fishers at the time of registration, online at <http://pwssc.org/locations-of-pws-acoustic-arrays/>, and available by request at ADF&G offices in Homer, Cordova, and Anchorage; contact PWSSC in Cordova at 907-424-5800 for more information.

Pollock – The directed pelagic trawl fishery will open at 12:00 noon January 20 with a 9.61 million lb guideline harvest level (GHL), a 32% increase from the 2023 GHL. Fishers must obtain a 2024 Pollock Fishery Registration from ADF&G no later than 4:30 p.m. January 15. ADF&G is extending the registration deadline to the first business day after the regulatory deadline of January 13 (5 AAC 28.206). Inseason catch reports, logbooks, and accommodation of an ADF&G observer upon request are required (5 AAC 28.263).

Pollock trip limits are 300,000 lb; harvest above that allowable amount must be documented as an overage on the fish ticket. Overage proceeds must include a relative percentage of sold pollock consistent with disposition codes reported on the fish ticket for all pollock landed. Therefore, a pollock trip limit overage will contain both pollock with disposition sold and other applicable disposition codes (e.g. pollock destined for fish meal). Proceeds from trip limit overages shall be submitted to ADF&G in Homer by the processor by check with a copy of the fish ticket documenting the overage.

While the directed pollock fishery is open, all pollock caught as bycatch must be retained by fishers participating in other groundfish fisheries in PWS. After the directed fishery closes, pollock must be retained up to the maximum allowable bycatch amount of 20% to other open directed groundfish fisheries (5 AAC 28.070 (e)). ADF&G will solicit bids for a test fishery, which funds research in PWS, before the season begins; the available harvest will be 900,000 lb.

Sablefish – PWS limited entry sablefish permit holders must obtain a 2024 PWS Sablefish Registration no later than 5:00 pm, April 1 to participate (5 AAC 28.206). Fishery season dates are April 15–August 31 (5 AAC 28.210(b)). The GHL is divided among registered permit holders under the shared quota system described in regulation 5 AAC 28.272. CFEC regulations allow an interim-use or limited entry permit holder to use a vessel with an overall length greater than the vessel category for which the permit is designated.

The 2024 PWS sablefish GHL is 244,000 lb, down 9% from 2023. After the registration deadline, ADF&G will distribute an announcement the first week of April outlining 2024 harvest allocation by permit class.

Prior notice of landing (PNOL) is required under 5 AAC 28.272. Fishers are required to report to ADF&G after each PWS sablefish trip by telephoning (907) 424-7225 at least 6 hours prior to landing and reporting the information specified on the registration.

Log sheets are required in this fishery (5 AAC 28.272 (f)) and must be submitted with fish tickets within seven days of landing. Sablefish in PWS may not be retained as bycatch. Whale depredation on hooked sablefish has been an ongoing issue, resulting in the removal of unknown numbers of sablefish during longline retrieval; fishers may document this by reporting any whale depredation on log sheets. In the PWS sablefish fishery, groundfish pots may be connected (longlined) if each end of the buoy line is marked (5 AAC 28.230 (c)(d)).

Rockfish – Rockfish in PWS may only be retained as bycatch to other directed groundfish fisheries. The PWS Rockfish Management Plan, 5 AAC 28.265, requires full retention of all rockfish caught and mandates that proceeds from the sale of any bycatch overage be paid to the State of Alaska. Rockfish bycatch limits in PWS are 20% to directed sablefish, 5% to directed Pacific cod, 10% to other directed groundfish and halibut, and 0.5% to the pelagic trawl pollock fishery. There is an overall rockfish GHL of 150,000 lb and a 5-day trip limit of 3,000 lb. Black and dark rockfish in federal waters of PWS are managed by ADF&G and accrue to the GHL. The department is seeking the assistance of participants in directed groundfish and halibut fisheries to set gear away from areas of known rockfish abundance and is considering pursuing additional regulatory management measures to control rockfish bycatch. Voluntary measures taken to aid in the conservation of rockfish are greatly appreciated and may have a positive effect on future opportunities.

Lingcod – ADF&G manages lingcod in both state and federal waters. Lingcod may not be retained until July 1. Participants in the PWS directed lingcod fishery must obtain a 2024 Directed Lingcod Registration. GHLS for the directed fishery are 7,300 lb for the Inside District and 25,300 lb for the Outside District. Lingcod may be retained as bycatch up to 20% of the directed groundfish or halibut species on board a vessel after July 1. Lingcod have a minimum size requirement of 35 inches (5 AAC 28.270). ADF&G will also issue an EO to require all lingcod be landed with the head on and the vent intact, for gender determination, so that biological sampling goals can be met.

In addition, fishers are required to report to ADF&G after each PWS lingcod trip by telephoning (907) 226-2121 at least 6 hours prior to landing and reporting the information specified on the registration.

Pacific cod – Two Pacific cod fishery seasons, the “parallel” and the “state-waters,” occur within PWS state waters. These seasons have distinct requirements including different registrations and gear limits. Parallel Pacific cod season participants must obtain a 2024 PWS Parallel Season Pacific Cod Registration, while state-waters Pacific cod season participants must obtain a separate 2024 PWS State-waters Season Pacific Cod Registration. Each registration is specific to gear type, and PWS is designated an exclusive registration area for vessels using longline hook and pot gear, and a nonexclusive registration area for vessels using jig gear, during the state-waters season. PWS is a nonexclusive registration area during the parallel season for all gear types. A 60-pot limit and pot tags are also required for pot vessels participating in the state-waters season. Since March of 2023 groundfish pots may be longlined in the state-waters Pacific Cod fishery (5AAC 28.230 (c)). Each end of the bouy line must be marked and each pot must have an ADF&G issued pot tag attached. Further marking regulations are defined in 5AAC 28.230 (d)(2)).

The parallel Pacific cod season will open January 1 and will be managed concurrently with NMFS management of the Pacific cod fishery in adjacent federal waters of the Central Gulf of Alaska (CGOA). The federal CGOA Pacific cod “B” season for vessels using jig gear may open June 10, whereas for pot and longline gear the “B” season may open September 1. Longlining groundfish pots is not permitted in the parallel Pacific cod season.

The state-waters Pacific cod season will open to longline hook gear seven days following the closure of the parallel longline season, which coincides with the federal less than 50 foot hook-and-line gear sector, but not earlier than the individual fishing quota (IFQ) halibut season opening date. The state-waters season will open to jig gear and/or pot gear 24 hours following the closure of the parallel season to those respective gear types. Participants in the state-waters PWS Pacific cod season are required to check in with the department prior to each fishing trip by telephoning (907) 424-7225; this requirement is detailed on the area registration form.

The 2024 PWS Pacific cod state-waters season GHLL is 1,618,744 lb. Due to the step up provision outlined in the *Prince William Sound Pacific Cod Management Plan* 5AAC 28.267(e)(1)(A), the GHLL is allocated 20% to pot and jig gear combined (323,749 lb) and 80% to longline gear (1,294,995 lb). The 2024 GHLL increased 26% from the 2023 GHLL. A subsequent advisory announcement will provide additional fishery information.

Refer to the “General” section at the beginning of this document for VMS and seabird avoidance requirements for parallel fishery participants and information on the NMFS Observer Program. The state-waters Pacific cod season will open in the Inside District, Western Section of the Outside District, and that portion of the Eastern Section of the Outside District west of Hook Point (146° 15.12' W. long.). Fishers are reminded that portions of the PWS Inside District are closed to fishing with groundfish pot gear (Figure 2; 5 AAC 28.250).

Regulations require that Pacific cod be retained up to the maximum bycatch allowance when a directed fishery for Pacific cod is closed, and that all Pacific cod caught incidentally to other groundfish fisheries must be retained when a directed fishery for Pacific cod is open (5 AAC 28.070 (e)). In PWS, the maximum bycatch allowance of Pacific cod is 20% to other directed groundfish and halibut fisheries for vessels using longline hook, pot, or jig gear.

Skates – There is no directed season for skates in PWS; however, skates may be retained as bycatch as a percentage, by weight, of directed finfish species on board a vessel. The allowable bycatch limit for combined skate species is 5%, which mirrors the federal 2024 maximum retainable amount (MRA) for the GOA.

Sharks – There is no directed season for sharks (including spiny dogfish) in PWS; however, these species may be retained as bycatch up to 15%, by weight, of directed halibut or groundfish species on board a vessel.

Cook Inlet Area

Cook Inlet Area (5 AAC 28.300): all waters of Alaska within Cook Inlet and along the outer Kenai Peninsula north of the latitude of Cape Douglas (58° 51.10' N. lat.) and west of the longitude of Cape Fairfield (148° 50.25' W. long.) (Figure 3).

Cook Inlet District: Waters of Alaska in the Cook Inlet Area north of a line from Cape Douglas to Point Adam (59° 15.27' N. lat.).

North Gulf District: Waters of Alaska in the Cook Inlet Area north of the latitude of Cape Douglas, and west of the longitude of Cape Fairfield excluding the Cook Inlet District.

Pollock – There is no directed fishery for walleye pollock in the Cook Inlet Area. However, pollock must be retained up to the maximum bycatch allowance of 20% to other directed groundfish or halibut fisheries (5 AAC 28.070 (e)).

Sablefish – Participation in the fishery requires a Cook Inlet Area 2024 Sablefish Registration. The fishery has a vessel trip limit of 3,000 lb of sablefish (round weight) in any two consecutive days. Sablefish may be retained in the state waters of the Cook Inlet Area only by a vessel registered for the directed fishery and only when the directed season is open.

Beginning in this 2024 season the Cook Inlet sablefish fishery will open April 15 with a fishery GHL of 105,000 lb, a 11% decrease from the 2023 GHL. The GHL is adjusted annually by applying the relative change each year in the NMFS CGOA ABC, which is derived from NMFS stock assessment surveys and adopted by the NPFMC.

Prior notice of landing (PNOL) is required under the *Cook Inlet Sablefish Management Plan* (5 AAC 28.360). Fishers are required to report to ADF&G after each sablefish trip in the Cook Inlet Area by telephoning (907) 226-2121 at least 6 hours prior to landing and reporting the information specified on the registration.

Sablefish pots may be longlined; no more than 15 groundfish pots may be attached to the same longline and at least one buoy, properly marked, must be attached to each end of the longline (5 AAC 28.330 (c)). In addition, there are log sheet requirements in this fishery (5 AAC 28.360 (b)) and log sheets must be submitted with corresponding fish tickets within seven days of landing.

Rockfish – The *Cook Inlet Rockfish Management Plan* (5 AAC 28.365) requires full retention of all rockfish caught and mandates that proceeds from the sale of any bycatch overage be paid to the State of Alaska. Rockfish bycatch allowances are 10% during directed groundfish and halibut fisheries. A jig-only (mechanical jig or hand troll gear) fishery targeting pelagic shelf rockfish (PSR), defined in 5 AAC 39.975 as black, dark, dusky, widow, yellowtail, and deacon rockfish, opens July 1 and allows rockfish bycatch up to 20% for non-PSR species. Participation in the directed fishery requires a Cook Inlet Area 2024 directed rockfish fishery registration. There is a 150,000 lb GHL for all rockfish species combined (bycatch and directed harvest) in the Cook Inlet Area. Black and dark rockfish in federal waters are managed by ADF&G as part of the Cook Inlet Area GHL. There is a 1,000 lb trip limit in the Cook Inlet District and a 4,000 lb trip limit in the North Gulf District; trip limits apply to a five consecutive day period.

In the directed rockfish fishery, there is a prior notice of landing (PNOL) for the Cook Inlet Area. Fishers are required to contact ADF&G after each directed pelagic rockfish jig trip in the Cook Inlet Area by telephoning (907) 226-2121 at least 6 hours prior to landing and must report the information specified on the registration. In addition, there are log sheet requirements (5AAC 28.365 (e)(1)); log sheets must be submitted with corresponding fish tickets within seven days of landing.

Lingcod – ADF&G manages lingcod in both state and federal waters. Lingcod may not be retained until July 1. Directed fishing for lingcod is restricted to harvest with jig (mechanical and hand troll) gear and has a 52,500 lb GHL. Participation in the directed fishery requires a Cook Inlet Area 2024 lingcod fishery registration. Lingcod may be retained as bycatch after July 1 to other directed fisheries at the 20% level and only when the directed lingcod fishery is open. There is a minimum size requirement of 35 inches (5 AAC 28.370). Resurrection Bay, north of a line from Aialik Cape to Cape Resurrection, is closed to retention of lingcod. Prior notice of landing (PNOL) is required under Landing Requirements for Cook Inlet Area (5 AAC 28.371). Fishers are required to report to ADF&G after each lingcod trip in the Cook Inlet Area by telephoning (907) 226-2121 at least 6 hours prior to landing and reporting the information specified on the registration. There is no log sheet requirement for the directed lingcod fishery but participants are encouraged to use log sheets from the directed rockfish fishery to provide the department with more information on lingcod.

Pacific cod – Two Pacific cod fishery seasons, the “parallel” and the “state-waters,” occur within Cook Inlet Area state waters. These seasons have distinct requirements including different registrations and gear limits. Parallel Pacific cod season participants must obtain a Cook Inlet Area 2024 Parallel Season Pacific Cod Registration.

State-waters Pacific cod season participants must obtain a separate Cook Inlet Area 2024 state-waters Pacific Cod Season Registration. Each registration is specific to gear type, and CI is designated an exclusive registration area during the state-waters season. A 60-pot limit and pot tags are required for pot vessels participating in the state-waters season.

The parallel Pacific cod season will open January 1 for vessels using pot, jig, and longline gear and will be managed concurrently with NMFS management of the Pacific cod fishery in adjacent federal waters of the Central Gulf of Alaska (CGOA). The federal CGOA Pacific cod “B” season for vessels using jig gear may open June 10, whereas for pot and longline gear the “B” season may open September 1.

Twenty-four hours following the closure of the initial parallel Pacific cod seasons for pot and jig gear, the respective state-waters Pacific cod seasons for pot and jig gear will open in the Cook Inlet Area. Longline gear is not a legal gear type in the Cook Inlet Area state-waters Pacific cod season.

The Cook Inlet Area GHL for the 2024 season is 1,702,244 lb. The GHL will be allocated 85% to pot gear (1,446,908 lb) and 15% to jig gear (255,337 lb); only 25% of the total GHL may be harvested by vessels >58 feet fishing with pot gear (425,561 lb). The 2024 GHL increased 39% from the 2023 GHL. A subsequent advisory announcement will provide additional fishery information.

Regulations require that Pacific cod be retained up to the maximum bycatch allowance when a directed fishery for Pacific cod is closed, and all Pacific cod caught incidentally to other groundfish fisheries must be retained when a directed fishery for Pacific cod is open (5 AAC 28.070(e)). The maximum bycatch allowance of Pacific cod in the Cook Inlet Area is 20% to other directed groundfish and halibut fisheries for vessels using longline, pot, or jig gear.

Refer to the “General” section at the beginning of this document regarding the VMS and seabird avoidance requirements for parallel fishery participants and information on the NMFS Observer Program. Portions of both Kachemak Bay and Kamishak Bay are closed to fishing with groundfish pot gear. Fishers are reminded to check with groundfish staff in Homer or consult regulations regarding specific areas of the Cook Inlet Area closed to fishing with pot gear (Figure 4).

Pacific cod fishing closures related to Steller sea lion conservation establish longline and pot gear closures within 10 nmi, in addition to no-transit zones within 3 nmi, of Sugarloaf Island and Outer Pye Island (Figure 3). For specific regulatory language describing the closure areas, contact NMFS in Kodiak at (907) 481-1711 or consult the NMFS website at: <https://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/fisheries/sslpm>.

Skates – There is no directed season for skates in the Cook Inlet Area; however, skates may be retained as bycatch as a percentage, by weight, of directed finfish species on board a vessel. The allowable bycatch limit for combined skate species is 5%, which mirrors federal 2024 MRA for GOA.

Sharks – There is no directed season for sharks (including spiny dogfish) in the Cook Inlet Area, however, these species may be retained as bycatch up to 15%, by weight, of directed halibut or groundfish species on board a vessel.

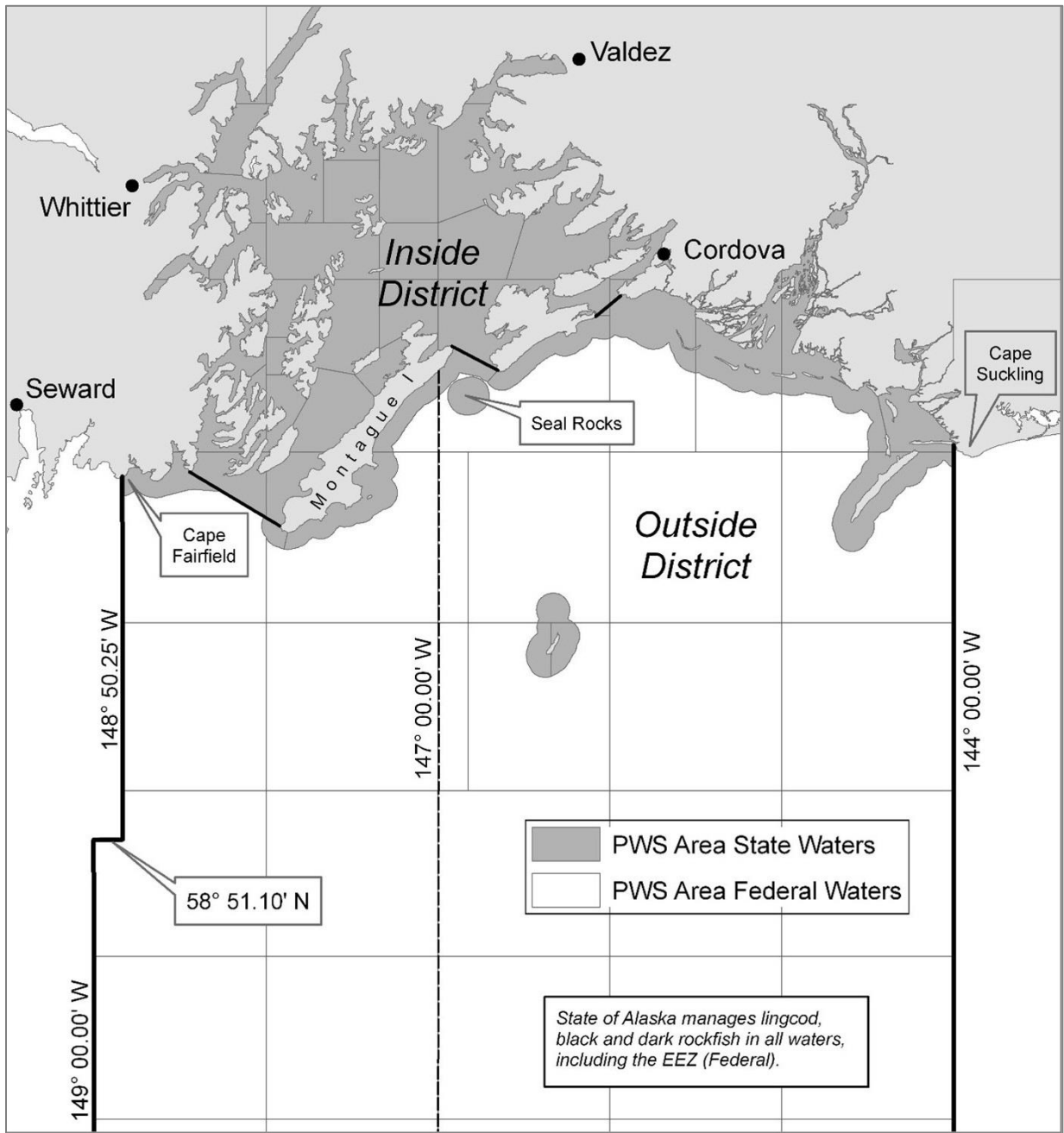


Figure 1.—Prince William Sound Area boundaries and groundfish districts.

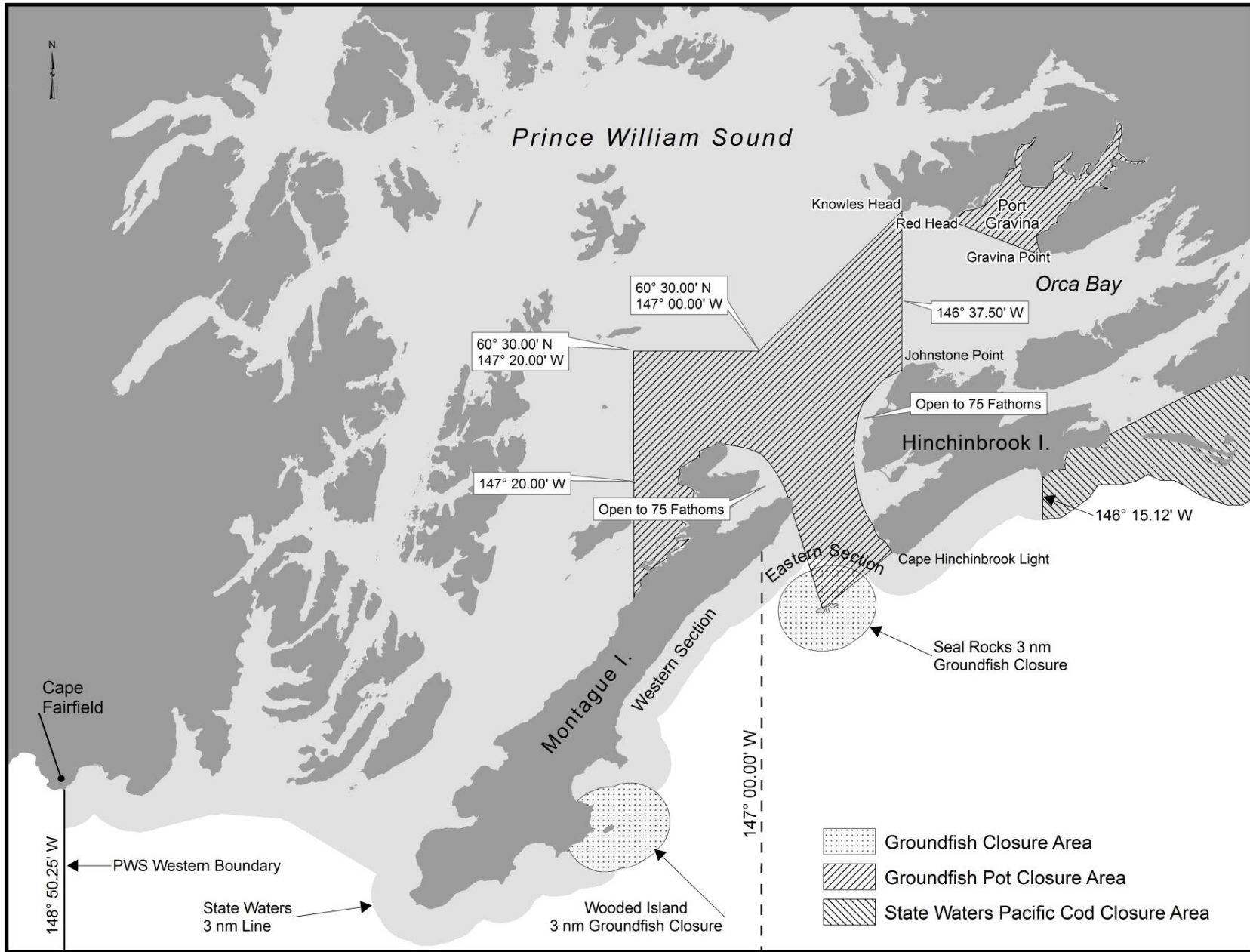


Figure 2.—Prince William Sound Area closures to groundfish pot gear, groundfish fishing around Steller sea lion rookeries, and to the state-waters Pacific cod season.

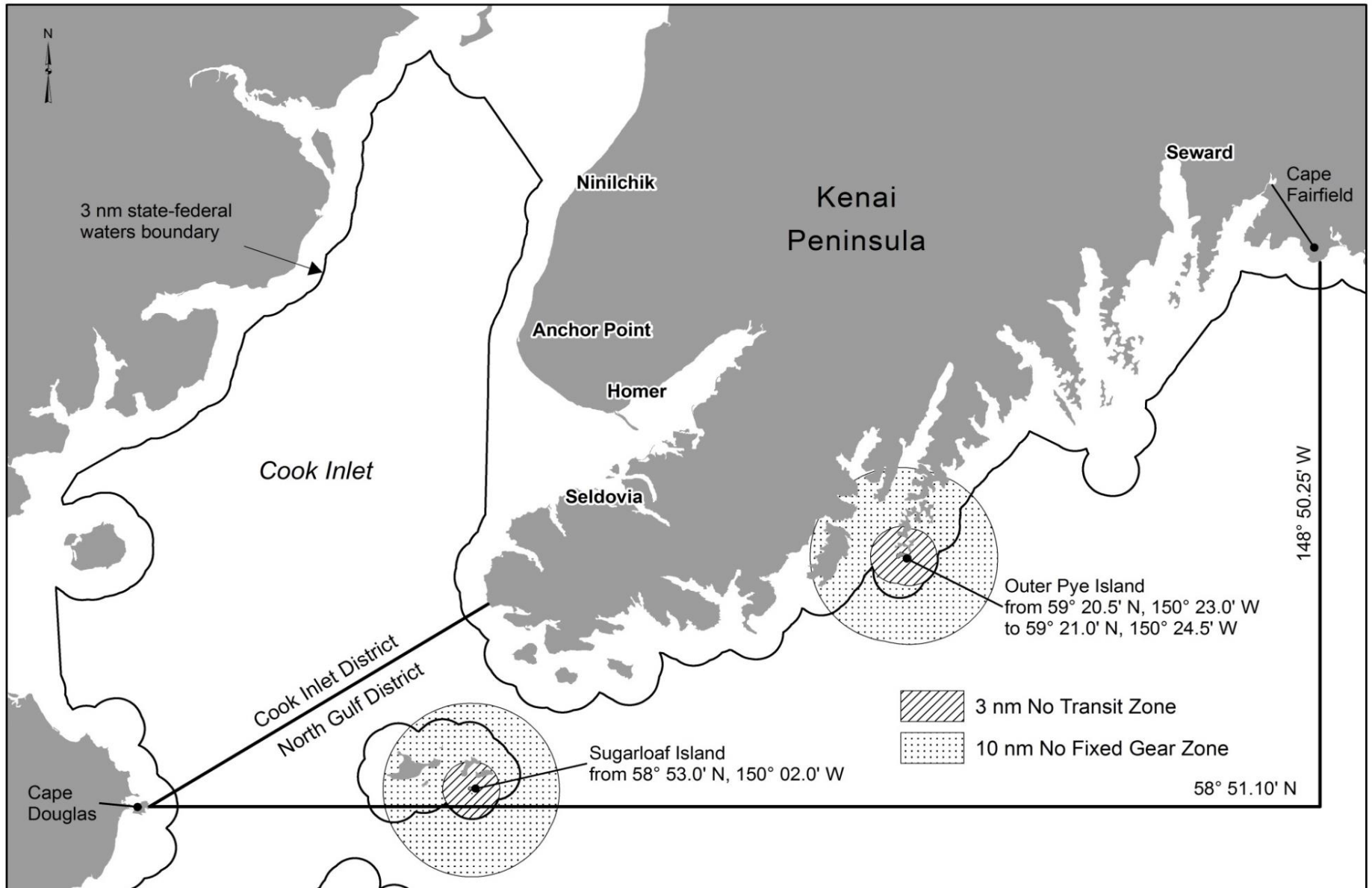


Figure 3.—Vessel no-transit and fixed gear Pacific cod fishing closure zones around Steller sea lion rookeries within the Cook Inlet Area.

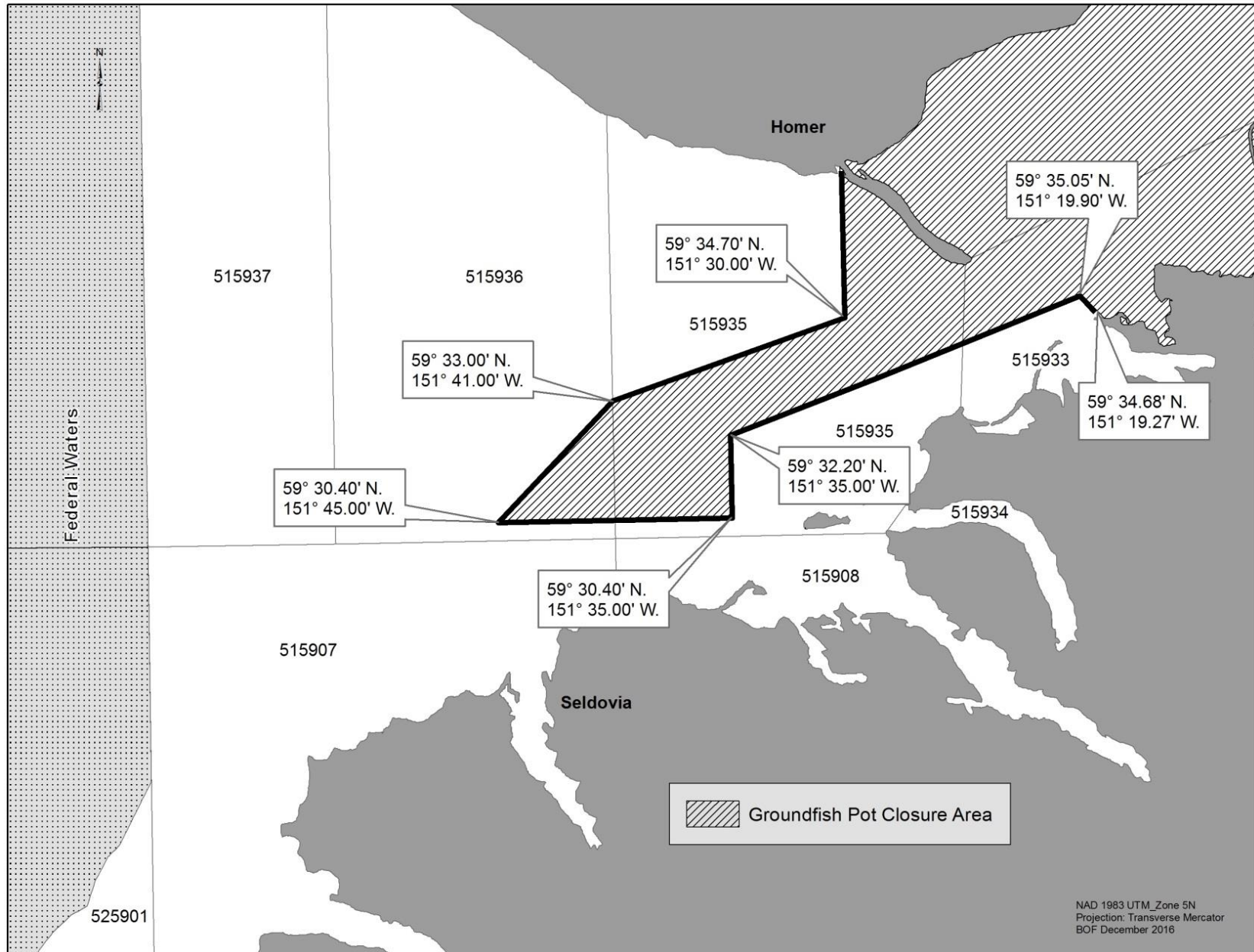


Figure 4.—Kachemak Bay groundfish pot closure area with coordinates for the Cook Inlet Area.

-end-