



Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council (BAC)
Bycatch Utilization Subcommittee
Meeting Minutes – December 19, 2023

Subcommittee Members: Brian Gabriel (Chair), Chelsae Radell, Duncan Fields

Call to Order: Chair Gabriel called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM with all three subcommittee members present. Introductions of subcommittee members were made.

Also present were Bycatch Advisory Council members Linda Kozak and Stephanie Madsen, as well as Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker. Thirteen individuals attended the meeting.

Approve Agenda: The agenda was approved.

Meeting Minutes: The meeting minutes from November 20, 2023 were approved.

New Business: Chair Gabriel announced three presentations which were to be given.

- a) SeaShare donation program was presented by Executive Director Jim Harmon. This organization accepts bycatch of salmon and halibut for distribution to communities and food banks. Approximately 10% of the seafood distribution is bycatch, about 6.5 million pounds. The program is voluntary, with most participation by the pollock at-sea fleet, as well as shore-based processors. A PDF of the presentation is included in the meeting information.

Subcommittee issues raised and questions:

- Other PSC species that are donated include crab and lingcod.
- NMFS enforcement seizures of product are not donated, but help fund NMFS enforcement efforts.
- Size of salmon averages around 5-7# and are bright fish and most are taken from the Bering Sea. Most of the halibut is small as well and taken in the Gulf of Alaska.
- SeaShare could distribute ten times the amount that is currently donated.
- Efforts to finding a balance without legitimizing bycatch is a goal.
- Some Western Alaskan communities will not accept deliveries of fish taken as bycatch.

- b) Deputy Commissioner Rachel Baker provided an overview on Gulf of Alaska prohibited species retention requirements and restrictions. Information included historical retained and discarded groundfish totals. A PDF of the presentation is included in the meeting information.

Subcommittee issues raised and questions:

- Halibut stocks have dropped dramatically in recent years and the halibut bycatch has also been reduced. Other factors include market considerations for lower catches of flatfish, also resulting in lower takes of halibut bycatch.
- More information is needed on the size of halibut taken in the trawl fleet as bycatch and if it is feasible for processing and consumption.
- There is also consideration for the required release of halibut under 32" by the directed longline fishery.

- c) Chelsae Radell gave an oral presentation on behalf of the Kodiak shoreside processing sector and no single company was represented due to unavailability. She provided a summary of discussions specific to Gulf of Alaska fisheries and those points are shown below:
- Processors need to be part of the conversation moving forward and looking ahead to the next 20 years.
 - They are aware that increased utilization of prohibited species, especially salmon is a sensitive topic for many Alaskans.
 - The processing sector is also experiencing great difficulty now and adding a layer of required utilization of bycatch would increase labor and other costs and is not feasible with the current market conditions.
 - Issues facing the processing sector include supply chain problems, tariffs, Russian flooding of the markets for all seafood, and consumer resistance, just to identify a few.
 - It is everyone's goal to reduce waste and increase utilization without creating incentives. The processors are sensitive to the concerns about more full utilization of salmon, halibut and crab.
 - All Kodiak processors are part of the SeaShare program and do everything they can to donate seafood without substantially increasing their costs.
 - Majority of salmon and halibut in GOA trawl fisheries are too small and not easy to process.
 - Processor problems include the quality of fish, size of fish and workforce challenges. If regulations were changed to require full crab retention and utilization, it could likely require significant investment in infrastructure changes. Some Kodiak processors are not set up to process crab at all.
 - Bycatch at a volume that would make increased utilization efficient is infrequent and sporadic.
 - Requiring full retention of crab and halibut would result in higher mortality, when currently a percentage are assumed to live depending on the fishery.
 - Changing regulations as a way to reduce bycatch should be considered.
 - There are also catcher processors who participate in GOA fisheries. If changes were implemented for both shoreside processing and at-sea processing in the Gulf, would need to understand how it would affect both sectors. The majority of CPs only create head and gut (H&G) product and they also have specific logistical and space concerns since being required to process and retain bycatch would significantly impact operations. They would have less storage for product that makes money and since vessels operate on crewshares/case rates, it would likely make trips uneconomical and difficult to retain crew.

Public Comment: One member of the public provided comment.

Cory Lescher (Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers): Expressed appreciation for the presentations and felt the subcommittee work was useful to keep the conversation going. In talking about full utilization, there should be consideration for fully utilizing the entire fish/crab product and an example was given about ways to utilize crab carapaces.

Subcommittee Discussion:

Several points were addressed by subcommittee members:

- Questions were raised regarding the NMFS revenue system for bycatch proceeds.
- Processors are now processing at their cost and donating all product. Is there a better way to address this?
- We should not be attempting to supplement the SeaShare program, but look at another path moving forward where product can be put into the market.
- Maybe look at regulatory discards, instead of just prohibited species, with halibut utilization mentioned as an area where progress could be made.

Some discussion regarding presentations to the subcommittee was held, specifically regarding the utility of asking one or more CDQ groups to address their efforts. After a significant discussion it was determined to not request any presentations, but continue the subcommittee conversation, focused on the Gulf of Alaska.

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Several issues were raised during the meeting that need further discussion and ways to address the challenges. These include:

- IPHC regulatory restrictions
- Other regulatory changes that can help reduce bycatch
- How bycatch proceeds can/should be utilized (such as observers or research)
- Transportation challenges
- Supply chain issues
- Tariffs and foreign production impacts
- Work force availability and cost
- Processing plant configuration issues to process certain products
- Market conditions
- Poor quality product if required instead of voluntary
- Small fish that are not easily processed
- Prohibited species vs. regulatory discards
- Processor participation and partnerships

Next Meeting: Tuesday, January 30, 2024 at 9:00 AM