

PROGRESS REPORT

Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force Recommendations

Prepared by Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council
Fall 2023

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:*

[Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force \(ABRT\) Final Report, November 2022](#)

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 Bycatch Advisory Council on September 5, 2023. This report highlights ABRT research recommendations. A link is shown below:

[Update on Salmon Research Relevant to Bycatch Task Force Research Recommendations \(alaska.gov\)](#)

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:*

[Amid Western Alaska salmon crisis, data-driven strategies could reduce chinook bycatch - Alaska Public Media](#)

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:*

[Trawl Performance Standard Workshop \(npfmc.org\)](https://www.npfmc.org/Workshop/2023-10-02-Trawl-Performance-Standard-Workshop)

- 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 the International 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.*