Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force Recommendations Progress Report

Fall 2025

This report is an update on the status of recommendations from the Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force Final Report. Recommendations that are **bolded have been completed**, plain text are underway, and *italics text have not been initiated*

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 within the ADFG website to provide upcoming meeting information, presentations, and links to sites of interest
2. Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council (BAC) virtual meetings provided presentations on how to access bycatch information at the NPFMC, NMFS, and state levels, as well as updates on state engagement, research, and management actions
3. Annual progress report provides 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. **ADFG officials meet virtually and in person with Alaskans 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 town hall meetings on bycatch**

Recommendation: Create a permanent bycatch advisory entity

Progress: ADF&G Commissioner established the Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council in 2023 and made it effective for three years.

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 legislation was finalized and in effect through 2028

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 and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council have urged the State Department to provide accountability through observers or other means to determine Chinook and chum take by Russian vessels. No response has been provided by the State Department.

Recommendation: The State of Alaska should develop a State of Alaska Bycatch Policy to be used at the Board of Fisheries and North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

Progress: This has not been initiated specifically for state fisheries. For federal fisheries bycatch management, State of Alaska positions are informed by fishery-specific conditions and Magnuson Stevens requirements to balance bycatch objectives with other key management priorities.

Research Recommendations

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 working with Tribes, communities, industry, and the public to receive input and inform on bycatch research projects.

Recommendation: The State develop an inclusive process for identifying bycatch research, broadly share those research needs and seek partnerships to fund necessary research

Progress: The state participates in the North Pacific Council process to review and identify federal research priorities to cover a 5-year time period (currently 2024 – 2028). These priorities are required to be submitted to the Secretary of Commerce and the Alaska Fisheries Science Center per the Magnuson Stevens Act, as well as shared with universities and funding entities. The state representatives on the NPFMC solicit input on federal research priorities via their public meetings with Alaskans referenced in recommendation #2.

Salmon Research Goals

Recommendation:

1. Research to improve our ability to determine the stock of origin of chum and Chinook salmon taken as bycatch
2. 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: The ADF&G genetics lab is working on the South Peninsula chum salmon fishery analysis and intends to publish results from samples collected during the 2022 through 2024 seasons prior to the February 2026 Board of Fisheries meeting for the Alaska Peninsula area. This project is currently funded through the 2026 fishing season.

In addition, ADF&G staff have been collecting genetic samples from Chinook salmon harvested in the South Alaska Peninsula fisheries. They collected some samples in 2024 and began in earnest in 2025. Funding for sampling is expected through 2027 and funding for genotyping and analysis is expected from the GOA Chinook Assessment and Stock ID Project.

The State has supported work by the pollock industry and BBSRI inseason genetic sampling to determine stock of origin for chum salmon bycatch in the pollock fishery (mobile lab in Dutch Harbor) to inform spatial and temporal management of the pollock fishery to avoid Western Alaska chum salmon that are a small component of but mixed in with Russian/Asian origin chum. The Alaska legislature supported continuation of the project in the 2025 budget process and ADF&G staff continue to support the project with genetic and scale aging expertise.

Recommendation: Studies that help us understand how ocean/climate conditions impact future salmon runs, in both the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska

Progress: As identified in the North Pacific Council's research priorities database, several research projects are underway to improve the resolution of Chinook and chum salmon genetic stock identification methods, improve precision of salmon run size estimates in western Alaska, and initiate investigations of ecosystem factors influencing salmon natural mortality rates during ocean migration in the GOA and BSAI. Baseline development is nearing completion, but more work on Cook Inlet chum is needed.

Research - Western Alaska Salmon

Recommendation: Improved information on marine migration patterns and its relation to fishery locations and timing

Progress: This action has not been initiated

Recommendation: improved information on the characteristics of fishery catches, age stock-specific age of Chinook and chum salmon caught in any marine fisheries

Progress: This action has not been initiated

Recommendation: Improved information to help understand fishery impacts, including improved Adult Equivalent modeling of salmon bycatch

Progress: The North Pacific Council uses estimates of the adult equivalence (AEQ) of Chinook salmon that would have returned to 1) aggregated coastal western Alaska river systems and 2) the Upper Yukon River, had they not been caught as bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. This evaluation is conducted periodically and is consistently updated and improved. Updated data include results from new age and growth studies, updated maturation rates for western Alaskan systems, detailed total bycatch data (including length compositions), and updated Chinook salmon genetic information. With the associated run reconstructions for the aggregated coastal western Alaska stocks and for the Upper Yukon River. Together these are used to estimate AEQ mortality and impacts attributed to the pollock fishery, by region of origin.

Recommendation: Understand critical survival periods for Western Alaska salmon through integrated ecosystem assessment surveys including expansion of the northern Bering Sea pelagic trawl survey into the near shore waters north of the Yukon River including Norton Sound

Progress: Not funded beyond 2023

Recommendation: Study how ocean/climate conditions impact future runs, specifically sampling immature AYK chum

Progress: *This action has not been initiated*

Recommendation: Study the role of diet, health, and disease on the survival and spawning success of Western Alaska Chinook and chum

Progress: *This action has not been initiated*

Research - Gulf of Alaska Chinook

Recommendation: Conduct annual genetic and spatial assessment of Gulf of Alaska Chinook salmon, in addition to the genetic assessment that is currently taking place. Efforts should be made to produce estimates of both the spatial and temporal bycatch of

Alaska stocks of Chinook salmon, as well as characterizations of the age, sex and size of the bycatch of Chinook salmon identified as stocks of Alaska origin. If further progress can be made towards identifications of stock of origin of Alaska Chinook salmon taken as bycatch, that too should be pursued

Progress: ADF&G will receive funding for a three-year comprehensive effort to sample, assess, analyze, and report the stock composition of Chinook salmon harvested across the Gulf of Alaska, ensuring sustainable management of Chinook salmon in the face of current fishery challenges. The program will integrate the stock identification results with existing programs to enable the development of a gulf-wide understanding of fisheries harvests, Chinook productivity, marine distributions, and potential impacts on Alaskans. This program is coordinated by the Divisions of Commercial Fisheries and Sport Fisheries.

Recommendation: Research that can provide an additional (non-adult) abundance estimate.

Progress: A partial juvenile salmon survey was completed in the western Gulf of Alaska in 2023. In 2025, ADF&G completed two of three survey legs aboard the R/V Solstice and a full survey is anticipated in 2026 aboard the R/V Equinox.

Research - Crab

Recommendation: address observed and unobserved mortality caused by gear interactions including: impacts of repeated capture/discarding of females, sublegal and legal males; study and update discard mortality rates by gear; address data gaps in crab fisheries and unobserved state Pacific cod fishery with pot gear; research habitat disturbance utilizing the fishing effects model to study effects of bottom contact gear on mating and molting crab

Progress: At the June 2025 meeting, the North Pacific Council received presentations on gear innovation research and other research that is being conducted to better quantify and understand bottom contact by pelagic trawl gear. The Council intends to use this information to evaluate management measures in 2026 to further minimize the impacts of pelagic trawl gear in areas that are currently closed to nonpelagic trawl gear and to address potential unobserved crab mortality, unless the industry can document limited seafloor contact and/or impacts.

Recommendation: Continue research on critical crab habitat to better inform open and closed areas for commercial fishing activity including: tagging studies and other research to determine seasonal crab movement and distribution; work to improve understanding of preferred habitat at various life stages including mating and molting time and areas, examine VMS use in Essential Fish Habitat models and ways to improve this data

Progress: *This action has not been initiated*

Research - Halibut

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

Progress:

1. Total Removals - The IPHC relies primarily on reporting of landings and discard mortality from domestic agencies. At its 99th Annual Meeting (https://www.iphc.int/uploads/pdf/am/am099/iphc-2023-am099-r.pdf?_t=1699037260), the IPHC received a report on minimum data collection standards for Pacific halibut by scientific observer programs (https://www.iphc.int/uploads/2023/11/IPHC-2023-AM099-16-Minimum-data-collection-standards-for-observers.pdf). The IPHC has recently investigated logbook and observer data to estimate marine mammal depredation (https://www.iphc.int/uploads/pdf/srb/srb022/iphc-2023-srb022-08.pdf?_t=1699037675, https://www.iphc.int/uploads/2023/11/IPHC-2023-SRB023-06-Stock-A-Dev.pdf).
2. Discard Mortality - The IPHC has conducted research to directly estimate discard mortality of Pacific halibut captured and released in the longline Pacific halibut fishery and recently reported on discard mortality rates and on factors potentially influencing post-release survival in Pacific halibut (Loher et al., 2022; Dykstra et al., 2024; links included). In addition, the IPHC has recently conducted research to directly estimate discard mortality of Pacific halibut captured and released in the recreational fishery, and summarized in a recent report (section 4.2; IPHC-2024-RAB025-06).

Recommendation: study impacts of repeated capture/discarding of females, sublegals, and legal males

Progress: The IPHC has been collecting data on prior hooking injuries in Pacific halibut collected in IPHC's Fishery Independent Setline Survey since 2014 and these data are posted on the IPHC website at FISS Biologicals – Maps and Plots - IPHC under Prior-hooking Injuries.

Recommendation: study impacts of fish gear types on halibut habitat

Progress: This action has not been initiated

Recommendation: increase tagging studies to better understand movement between areas

Progress: The IPHC is continuing a long-term tagging study initiated in 2015 of Pacific halibut under 32 inches in length encountered on the NMFS groundfish bottom trawl survey and on the IPHC's Fishery Independent Setline Survey to study Pacific halibut movement among IPHC Regulatory Areas.

Recommendation: investigate halibut diet and growth rate to better understand changes in length at age

Progress: The IPHC is prioritizing studies to better understand factors influencing size at age in Pacific halibut, including studies aimed at better understanding the effect of temperature on juvenile growth and at investigating the relationship between temperature, density and weight at age over long time series.

Recommendation: study size limit and trade-offs

Progress: IPHC report in October 2021 https://www.iphc.int/uploads/2023/10/iphc-2021-am097-09.pdf **and 2022** https://www.iphc.int/uploads/2023/11/iphc-2022-msab017-09.pdf

Recommendation: determine relative fecundity of halibut based on size and age, and estimate impact on halibut stock

Progress: The IPHC has collected samples for fecundity since 2023 and will begin studies on fecundity in late 2025.

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-target gear, or discards in a directed fishery that are required by regulation

Progress:

1. **The Alaska Bycatch Advisory Council 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. A final report was provided to the BAC in April of 2024.** https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/fishing/PDFs/bycatchtaskforce/041624_abac_report.pdf
2. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council approved a motion at the October 2023 meeting to support a discussion paper by NMFS concerning management of the maximum retainable amount regulations. In April of 2025 they reviewed an initial

review and final action is scheduled for October 2025. This action would reduce regulatory discards by clarifying current regulations and making MRA regulations easier, which would therefore increase utilization of non-Prohibited Species incidental catch

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 pot cod fisheries

Progress: This action has not been initiated

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: An extended discussion paper for GOA Tanner crab protections was reviewed at the April 2025 North Pacific Council meeting, and the Council recommended alternatives for regulatory closures to protect Gulf Tanner crab and for evaluating existing crab closure areas around Kodiak Island for modification or removal. The analysis is currently scheduled for April 2026.

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: The Fishery Monitoring Advisory Committee to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council has supported development of EM with 100% monitoring for non-pelagic gear in the Central Gulf of Alaska Rockfish Program, which targets rockfish, sablefish, and Pacific cod. The CGOA Rockfish participants (fishermen and processors) are conducting an EFP (experimental/research) in 2025 to determine operational and catch accounting needs under an 100% electronic monitoring program. This is the precursor to a regulated program.

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 on all GOA catchers and tenders.

Progress: This action has been approved for the pelagic trawl fleet fishing and tenders for pollock in the Gulf of Alaska and was implemented via regulation beginning in 2025.

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 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 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 was reviewed at the February 2024 NPFMC meeting and the Council did not move forward with a regulatory action of pot gear.

Recommendation: 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 NPFMC had a discussion paper on their agenda for this at the June 2025 meeting. Due to timing they had to drop this agenda item and it is tentatively scheduled for review in October 2025.

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

Progress: This action has not been initiated

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

Progress: This action has not 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: NPFMC initiated an analysis on development of further chum management measures, including caps and caps/closures of a corridor for Western AK chum at the April 2023 meeting. Several iterations of the analysis have occurred and final action is scheduled for the February 2026 meeting

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

Progress: In June 2025 the North Pacific Council outlined research and timeline expectations concerning pelagic trawl gear innovation to reduce bottom contact and improve ability to estimate unobserved mortality of crab. The Council also requested inclusion of dynamic spatial closures by the pollock fishery in the Bristol Bay Red King Crab Savings Area for 2026. A progress report will be provided in early 2026.

Recommendation: The State should work to achieve real time genetic reporting that provides the composition of Western Alaska salmon in 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: The State has supported work in 2024 and 2025 by the pollock industry and BBSRI inseason genetic sampling to determine stock of origin for chum salmon bycatch in the pollock fishery (mobile lab in Dutch Harbor) to inform spatial and temporal management of the pollock fishery to avoid Western Alaska chum salmon that are a small component of but mixed in with Russian/Asian origin chum. A report on

preliminary findings was presented at the February 2025 NPFMC meeting. The Alaska legislature supported the continuation of the project in the 2025 budget process.

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 been initiated