

ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES
FINDING OF FACT
ON
BRISTOL BAY 32 FOOT VESSEL LENGTH
2019-295-FB

RC 127

This written finding is intended to inform and educate future boards and the public as to the history of the 32-foot vessel length limitation to vessels participating in the drift gillnet fishery.

The 32-foot length limitation in Bristol Bay was established in 1949. That overall length remains unchanged through the date of this finding however there have been some descriptive changes of "length" throughout the years. The current regulation and description have been in effect since 1991, proposals to increase the length limit have been before the board in almost every cycle since 1991.

The board has not passed a modification to vessel length since the 1979 board meeting where the board repealed the 32-foot length limit effective prior to the 1982 fishing season. A subsequent board in 1981 adopted a regulation to continue the 32-foot vessel length. That board considered their action to be consistent with its responsibilities to conserve and develop the salmon resources of Bristol Bay, promote the orderly harvest and marketing quality of fishery products and to maximize the public interest.

Currently common justifications found in proposals in favor of changing or removing the 32-foot limit include:

- increased safety with larger vessels
- greater economic efficiency because of larger holding capacity, and improved product quality with increased size allowing installation of refrigeration of fish or increased capacity for icing/cooling of fish.
- larger vessel could be used in other fisheries more readily

Items commonly considered that are counter to a modification of the 32-foot length limit:

- increase in vessel length will likely increase harvest capacity and efficiency of the entire fleet
- increase in capacity/efficiency will exacerbate the allocation balance between the 2 gear groups
- greater disparity between fisherman who can afford to acquire a larger vessel and those who cannot.
- the Bristol Bay fishery is a limited entry fishery which limits the number of licenses to individual participants in the fishery. If individual permit holders are allowed to gain capacity after the fishery has been limited the overall intent of the limited entry program is undermined and can become ineffective.
- the Alaska Legislature and the BOF have made significant strides in allowing Bristol Bay fisherman to combine efforts to reduce both their operating costs and overall fishing effort, a change to the 32-foot vessel length would make those measures less effective.
- the percentage of vessels chilling their catch has risen from 24% in 2008 to 73% in 2017, this significant increase has been accomplished within the 32-foot length limit.

Over the last 69 years and an estimated 30 Bristol Bay regulatory meetings the 32-foot length limit has never been modified by regulation. Countless hours by the board and public have resulted in no changes to this foundational aspect of the Bristol Bay commercial salmon fishery.

This finding is to be considered a companion and update to the 1981 finding #81-92-FB.