



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **In the wake of historic Alaska crab closures, what's next?**

As crab fishermen face the harsh realities of catastrophic fishery closures, second and third generation crab harvesters are working to chart a path through a difficult future. Closures in Alaska's snow and red king crab fisheries in the Bering Sea come with a billion-dollar hit to the U.S. economy, pushing crab fishermen to lean into the problem, leading the way through adversity toward the hard work that will rebuild crab stocks and hopefully carve out a future for fishing families.

"This is a defining moment in U.S. fisheries management," said Jamie Goen, Executive Director for Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers (ABSC), the trade group representing Bering Sea crab fishermen. "We must focus on what we can control: helping hard-working fishing families and coastal communities and using the information we have to make better, more balanced, holistic management decisions. We have a plan to manage fisheries in the Bering Sea to keep all fisheries sustainable and resilient – even in the face of climate change. Executing this plan will take true leaders who are willing to evolve our rigid management, science, and governance systems and it will take collaboration among all fishing sectors, scientists, and agencies. It won't be easy but it is absolutely possible."

Across the country, fisheries are racing the clock to adjust to changing climate and growing uncertainty. In the North Pacific, ABSC is proposing a 3-prong approach for crab and disasters like it: provide rapid financial relief, develop adaptive and responsive management, and bolster continued science and research. Alaska's snow crab fishery is the perfect test case for innovating these crisis responses.

We need congressional support to build a more responsive financial relief system, but we also have no time to waste. An effective financial relief program must put money into the pockets of fishermen, and affected fishing communities, within six months. This approach mirrors one that farmers use following a crop failure to make sure family businesses stay afloat or like communities get after a hurricane or flood. Senator Murkowski's new Working Waterfronts Framework proposes such a program. Without this type of program for fishermen, we'll lose fishing families from the industry. Without them, U.S. fisheries are driven towards foreign or corporate owners who can weather an economic downturn but are far less tied to the success and well-being of our coastal communities.

Working with ABSC – and with 10 other organizations representing communities, harvesters, and processors – the Governor of Alaska expedited a fishery disaster request to the Secretary of Commerce last week. This is the first of many hurdles in the existing process. We need the Secretary to approve the request. We also need Congress to make money available in the annual federal budget. And we then need the state to create a plan for allocating any money received. Even expedited, this existing process typically takes years to get financial relief to fishermen.

At the same time, we need more adaptive, responsive fisheries management. The current system is mired in decades of bureaucratic and legal processes that drive towards inaction and status quo. We

need a system to manage U.S. fisheries that encourages and rewards conservation and swift action. ABSC has recommended actions to help better manage and conserve Alaska's crab stocks to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council for years -- recommendations like reducing bycatch limits to create incentives to avoid crab, protecting vulnerable molting and mating crab, protecting habitat, and creating dynamic closed areas -- all while keeping other fisheries on the water. Last year, ABSC proposed a one-year emergency measure to create immediate protections for Bristol Bay red king crab and habitat. These proposals are consistently denied even in the face of growing evidence that these actions would have helped crab stocks. But we won't give up fighting to rebuild these crab stocks that our livelihoods depend on. ABSC once again has an emergency request pending with the Secretary of Commerce to protect red king crab and their habitat.

A more holistic approach than simply closing the directed crab fishery and costing the U.S. economy over a billion dollars would be to share the burden of conservation across fishing sectors that impact the stock. To date, the Council, the state Fish and Game Commissioner, and NOAA Fisheries, have not taken additional meaningful actions on any other fisheries that impact Bering Sea crab and habitat. There is a better way to manage Bering Sea fisheries, one that rebuilds stocks, supports fishing communities, balances the impacts across all fishing sectors, and keeps everyone fishing, including the directed crab fishery.

A crab skipper with decades of experience, Mark Casto, of the FV Pinnacle said, "This is an unprecedented time for myself, my family, my crew and their families. This is the first time, in the 30 plus years that I have been captain/owner, that there will be no snow crab fishery. My seven-man crew, all who have worked with me for up to 23 years, will have to figure out something else to do. As a second-generation fishermen, I feel its time all Bering Sea fisheries come together and figure out how to work together on the issues we have control over. Issues such as bycatch in all fisheries, not fishing in areas during times when crab are molting and mating, and targeting the predatory fish that feed on the crab. If one fishery is closed, we need to lower the bycatch caps on all other fisheries. It's time to start working together, we are supposed to be the leaders in sustainable fisheries, it's time to act like it."

While we need action today, none of this replaces the need for continued science and research. There is cutting-edge climate science ongoing in the North Pacific and around the country. We must continue funding science and better leverage the information this research brings to inform how we manage. Our crabbers are ready to use their vessels as research platforms to better understand crab movement, habitat, and patterns of distribution for both juveniles and females. With fisheries closed, captains and their crews are eager to get moving on meaningful research this season.

But we can't let the promise of the future stall us from taking steps forward now. The status quo is not working, and crab stocks have collapsed. We must start using the information we have to act now while we continue to learn and adapt. It is going to take some innovative thinking, partnerships, and new ways of doing business. It will take a willingness to find a better path forward to rebuild crab stocks and fisheries resilience in the face of climate change and growing uncertainty. As we rebuild from this crisis point, let us turn it into a positive, resilient path forward for America's fishing families.

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The Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers is a trade association representing independent crab harvesters who commercially fish for king, snow (opilio), and bairdi (Tanner) crab with environmentally friendly pot gear

in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Crab Rationalization Program. There are approximately 60 vessels and 350 fishermen that participate in the fisheries, including communities around the Bering Sea, Kodiak, Anchorage, Homer, and the Pacific Northwest.

For questions, please contact Jamie Goen, Executive Director of Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers, at [jamie@alaskacrabbers.org](mailto:jamie@alaskacrabbers.org) or 206-417-3990.

For photos, see the following Dropbox folder:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/03g1d9nm4hwcuqe/AABXgTPN005zyaMrAhkz05Dfa?dl=0>