

COMMENTARY

Alaska's federal fisheries priorities

by DOUG VINCENT-LANG

Alaska's federal fisheries for halibut, pollock, Pacific cod, crab, and other groundfish are economically important at the local, state, and national level. These fisheries provide an economic base for many of our coastal communities through jobs and income from fishing, processing, industry support services, transportation, and shipping. Sustainable management of these fisheries is critically important to our state.

Alaska shares management responsibilities for federal (3 to 200 miles) fisheries with the federal government. Decisions regarding the management of these fisheries are made via the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. The North Pacific Council has a four-decade track record demonstrating that sustainable fisheries production is possible when based on the best scientific information available and conservative fishery management policies. The council has 11 voting seats – five are nominated by the state of Alaska and one is the commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. As a result, Alaska has the opportunity to focus the work of the council on issues of import to our state and its fishermen and communities.

Based on discussions with a diverse range of user groups, delegations from our coastal communities, fishermen, processor representatives, and other Alaskans, it is clear our fisheries are facing a number of challenges. These challenges include unprecedented declines in Bering Sea crab stocks and ongoing low harvestable levels of Pacific cod and other economically valuable stocks that are causing economic hardship for fishery participants and affected communities. We also heard ongoing concerns about the impacts of federal fisheries on key species like halibut, salmon, and crab. This input was valuable to better understand the issues and to identify priorities and potential solutions.

We plan to focus our efforts in the council over the next few years on several areas, each of import to fishery participants and our coastal communities. First is to continue council efforts to reduce bycatch of Western Alaska chum salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. We recognize the critical importance of chum salmon to Western and Interior Alaska communities and ecosystems and will continue to prioritize consideration of measures to further minimize Western Alaska chum bycatch in the pollock fishery at the council in a manner that does not increase the bycatch of other species.

We plan to continue addressing long-standing issues related to the observer program for groundfish and halibut fisheries. It is critical that managers have a robust observer program that provides high quality data for stock assessments and fisheries management. While about 93 percent of federal groundfish fisheries harvest is monitored by human observers and/or cameras, we recognize there are ongoing concerns about the limited portion of harvest that is not monitored by an observer or camera. We intend to work on finding program improvements that maximize monitoring efforts and use available funding more efficiently. We understand the program needs to be affordable and minimize impacts on fishing and processing operations. As technologies improve, we need to continue incorporating electronic monitoring systems into the

program. Finding the right mix will be challenging, but is critical towards ensuring catches and bycatch are accurately monitored and established limits are enforced in a manner that is economically viable for fishery participants.

Finally, we plan to move forward with three recommendations provided by the Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force to protect crab stocks in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. While the best available information suggests that changing ocean conditions are driving Bering Sea crab stock declines, we are committed to finding ways to better understand and reduce groundfish fishery impacts on crab stocks.

We will continue to work with the Bering Sea crab industry and research partners to better understand seasonal changes in Bristol Bay red king crab distribution and migration. This information will be critical to assess existing protection measures in council-managed groundfish fisheries in the Bering Sea.

We intend to consider a new management program for pot vessels over 60 feet in the Bering Sea Pacific cod fishery. Catch limits continue to be relatively low and the pace of this fishery has grown to a point where safety and bycatch have become concerns. As we explore management alternatives for this fishery, we will consider options for rationalization of the fishery based on catch histories or other approaches, opportunities for cooperative fisheries strategies, improvements in monitoring and fisheries data collection, and establishing incentives to reduce crab bycatch.

In the Gulf of Alaska, we intend to focus on monitoring and data collection to better understand the impacts of trawl fisheries on Tanner crab. We understand the importance of the Kodiak Tanner crab fishery to Alaska residents and want to ensure that appropriate groundfish fishery measures are in place to protect Tanner crab in areas that are important to the stock.

Based on discussions with a wide range of users, we will not begin development of a rationalization program for Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries. While there is a consensus that there are significant issues with this fishery, there is not broad consensus on whether a rationalization program is the appropriate method to address them. We will continue working with fishery participants to improve prosecution of the fisheries.

There are many other issues that will require council time including routine actions such as setting annual catch limits and development of charter halibut management measures to addressing management changes requested by Bering Sea crab and halibut and sablefish IFQ fishery participants. We understand this and will continue our commitment to these efforts.

In closing, we understand the importance of Alaska's federal fisheries and their contribution to our coastal economies and to fishery participants in the harvesting and processing sectors. We appreciate the efforts of our Alaska council team and are looking forward to working with others on issues facing these fisheries, including the priorities identified above.

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