

# North Pacific Fishery Management Council<sup>1</sup>

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## Management Update – March 2005

### **Ecosystem Management Approach**

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council has a long track record of incorporating ecosystem considerations into fishery management decisions. The precautionary ecosystem-based approach involves public participation, reliance on scientific research and advice, conservative catch quotas, comprehensive monitoring and enforcement, limits on bycatch of non-target species, marine protected areas, measures to protect marine mammals and seabirds, and other measures.

In June 2004, the Council and NOAA Fisheries completed a comprehensive (~7,000 pages) programmatic review of the groundfish fishery management plans. Based on this detailed examination of the fisheries with respect to the ecosystems in which they operate, the Council updated the FMP policy goals and objectives to more explicitly include the precautionary approach in decision making.

The Council's precautionary management approach is to apply judicious and responsible fisheries management practices, based on sound scientific research and analysis, proactively rather than reactively, to ensure the sustainability of fishery resources and associated ecosystems for the benefit of future, as well as current generations. The productivity of the North Pacific ecosystem is acknowledged to be among the highest in the world. Recognizing that potential changes in productivity may be caused by fluctuations in natural oceanographic conditions, fisheries, and other, non-fishing activities, the Council intends to continue to take appropriate measures to insure the continued sustainability of the managed species. The goal is to provide sound conservation of the living marine resources; provide socially and economically viable fisheries for the well-being of fishing communities; minimize human-caused threats to protected species; maintain a healthy marine resource habitat; and incorporate ecosystem-based considerations into management decisions.

The Council recently re-activated and reconstituted its Ecosystem Committee with new membership. The committee's mission statement is to discuss current ecosystem-related initiatives and assist in shaping Council positions relative to: (1) defining ecosystem-based management; (2) structure and Council role in potential regional ecosystem councils; (3) implications of NOAA strategic plan; (4) draft guidelines for ecosystem-based approaches to management; (5) draft MSA provisions or requirements relative to ecosystem-based management; and (6) generally coordinating with NOAA and other initiatives regarding ecosystem-based management. Staff is preparing a discussion paper suggesting ways for the Council to be involved in the development of NOAA's proposed ecosystem approach to management of the Alaska large marine ecosystems, including how current Council structure might be utilized to create a voluntary regional ecosystem governance structure.

The Council is exploring the possibility of preparing a separate fishery ecosystem plan for the Aleutian Islands area, or in some way designating the Aleutian Islands as a special management area. A discussion paper has been prepared by staff to examine how various potential management options correspond with

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<sup>1</sup> This is a publication of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council pursuant to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Award and NA03NMF4410302.

national ecosystem-based management initiatives being developed by NOAA, which the Council will be reviewing next month and determining next steps in that process.

## **New IFQs & Rights-Based Limited Access Programs**

### ***BSAI Crab Rationalization***

In June 2004, the Council completed its action on rationalizing the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands crab fisheries to alleviate overcapacity and safety issues associated with the race for fish. Under this program, harvest quota shares (QS) will be issued to vessel owners and captains, and processors will receive processing quota shares (PQS). The final rule implementing the Council's program for rationalizing the BSAI fisheries was published March 2, 2005, and the QS/PQS application process will begin April 4, 2005. Initial allocation is scheduled to be completed in early August 2005, with fishing beginning in the Aleutian Islands golden king crab fishery August 15. The Council also has initiated an analysis of alternatives for making two separate allocations of Tanner crab QS and PQS to support State management of that species as two stocks.

### ***Gulf Rationalization***

The Council has continued to develop and refine its alternatives for rationalization of the Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries. The Council has expressed its interest in developing a program that is coordinated with State management of fisheries in State waters (inside three nautical miles). The Council alternatives include IFQ and cooperative programs with components that could include possible allocations of harvest shares to processors, community groups, captains, and crew. Cooperative program alternatives also include processor protections and provisions intended to protect interests of communities and crews.

### ***Rockfish Demonstration Program***

The Council tentatively is schedule to conduct an initial review of the analysis of alternatives for the pilot rationalization program for the Central Gulf rockfish fisheries at its April meeting, with possible final action in June. The catcher vessel alternatives under analysis include a cooperative program with limited entry for processors and a cooperative program with processor associations. A set aside of 5% of the TAC would be divided 50/50 between trawl and non-trawl vessels in entry level fisheries.

### ***Halibut IFQ***

The Council has continued to refine its halibut and sablefish IFQ program, which has been in place since 1995. Specifically, the Council liberalized rules concerning QS of certain types that have historically gone unharvested. These rule changes affect the block program rules, vessel length restrictions, and use of QS outside their management area. The Council also tightened the hired skipper rules. In addition, the Council's program to expand the IFQ program to include charter vessel caught halibut is undergoing review by NOAA Fisheries. If approved, this program will be the first known recreational IFQ fishery.

## **Improved Scientific Review**

The Council has an active Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) that reviews all analytical documents prepared for each management change. The SSC consists of biologists, economists, and social scientists from academia and federal and state agencies. The SSC meets five times per year, concurrent with and at the same location as the Council meetings.

In addition to providing comments to analysts, the SSC makes recommendations to the Council on the adequacy of analytical documents relative to the best available scientific information. The SSC also reviews development of models and other analytical approaches for understanding impacts of fishery measures. Further, the SSC provides recommendations on priority areas for research.

The scientific review process used by the Council is multi-tiered and robust. For example, stock assessments and acceptable biological catch limits undergo a thorough internal review by the Alaska Fisheries Science Center. Each year, a couple of these assessment models are further reviewed by the Center for Independent Experts. Once completed by NOAA Fisheries scientists, the assessments are scientifically reviewed by the Plan Teams, consisting of federal, state, and university scientists. The SSC has final scientific review authority for the assessments. The Council then approves the Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for public distribution, and adopts the SSC's recommendations for Acceptable Biological Catch limits (ABCs). Because this process has worked so successfully, we have not made any additional changes to the existing scientific review process.

Related to the issue of scientific information in the management process, the Council and NOAA Fisheries are in the process of restructuring the funding and deployment process supporting our comprehensive on-board groundfish observer program. Primarily funded by industry, the observer program in the North Pacific deploys over 35,000 observer days annually, and information gathered by observers represents a critical underpinning to our science base and management process. The new program structure will allow for greater flexibility in placing observer coverage on fisheries and vessels where additional information is most needed.

## **Stock Rebuilding Progress**

The Council has rebuilding plans for the few stocks that are at low biomass levels. Specifically, rebuilding plans are in place for four Bering Sea crab stocks: Tanner crab, Snow crab, Pribilof Islands blue king crab, and St. Matthew blue king crab. In all of these cases, stock size fell below threshold levels not because of overfishing, but because environmental conditions had resulted in sequential years of poor recruitment.

The rebuilding plans are very aggressive, in that they reduce catch limits or close the fishery entirely until the stock increases to sustainable levels. However, because crab abundance is generally dependent on environmental conditions, rather than fishery management measures, the progress for rebuilding these stocks depends on factors largely out of the control of the Council or NOAA Fisheries. An example of this conundrum is the Pribilof Islands blue king crab rebuilding plan. The stock is not subject to any directed fishing mortality (the fishery has been closed since the early 1990s), bycatch mortality or habitat impacts (all trawling has been prohibited where the crabs are distributed since the mid 1990s). Yet the stock has continued to decline as a result of successive year-class failures. There is nothing else a rebuilding plan can do to bring back this stock; all we can do is wait for environmental changes to favor reproduction and survival.

## **New MPA's and Coral Protection**

In February 2005, the Council took significant action to identify and conserve essential fish habitat (EFH) from potential adverse effects of fishing. EFH is defined as those waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding, or growth to maturity.

A 2,500+ page scientific analysis was prepared to evaluate the total impacts of fishing on EFH, and evaluate alternatives to describe and conserve EFH from fishing impacts. Although the analysis concluded that fisheries do have long term effects on habitat, these impacts were considered minimal and

would not have detrimental effects on fish populations or their habitats. Nevertheless, continuing with its long history of precautionary, ecosystem-based management policy, the Council adopted several new and significant measures to conserve EFH.

The first action the Council took was to revise existing descriptions of EFH by incorporating the most recent scientific information and improved mapping. As such, EFH is now described as habitats within a general distribution for a life state of a species based on GIS data analysis. The second action taken by the Council was to formally adopt a new approach for identifying Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs). The new approach will allow HAPC to be designated as specific sites within EFH, thereby focusing conservation efforts in particular areas.

To minimize the effects of fishing of EFH, the Council's preferred alternative will provide significant, additional habitat conservation in the Aleutian Islands, and the Gulf of Alaska. To address concerns about the impacts of bottom trawling on benthic habitat (particularly on coral communities) in the Aleutian Islands, the Council took action to prohibit all bottom trawling, except in small discrete 'open' areas. Over 95% of the Aleutian Islands management area will be closed to bottom trawling (277,100 nm<sup>2</sup>) and about 4% (12,423 nm<sup>2</sup>) will remain open. Additionally, six areas with especially high density coral and sponge habitat will be closed to all bottom contact fishing gear (longlines, pots, trawls, etc.). These 'coral garden' areas, which total 110 nm<sup>2</sup>, are thus essentially considered marine reserves. To improve monitoring and enforcement of the Aleutian Island closures, a vessel monitoring system (VMS) will be required for all fishing vessels. Additionally a comprehensive plan for research and monitoring will be developed to improve scientific information about this area, and improve and evaluate effectiveness of these fishery management measures.

Within the Gulf of Alaska, the Council voted to prohibit bottom trawling for all groundfish species in 10 designated areas along the continental shelf. These areas, which are thought to contain high relief bottom and coral communities, total 2,086 nm<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the Council's five-year review on EFH, the Council will review available research information regarding two of the closed areas (Sanak, and Albatross) to determine efficacy of continued closure.

The Council also took action to initiate an expanded analysis for alternatives to minimize the effects of fishing on EFH in the Bering Sea. The analysis will include an assessment of gear modifications, additional closed areas, as well as other alternatives to be developed.

In addition to mitigating potential effects of fishing on EFH, the Council took final action to designate and protect HAPC off Alaska. Identification of HAPCs provides focus for additional conservation efforts for those habitat sites that are ecologically important, sensitive to disturbance, exposed to development activities, or rare.

Twenty HAPC areas, consisting of seamounts and high density coral areas, were identified as HAPC. To protect these areas, the Council took action to eliminate virtually all environmental impacts due to fishing by prohibiting any gear type that contacts the bottom. As a result, these areas will essentially be considered 'marine reserves'. While pelagic fishing would be allowed in these areas, none is anticipated, so resource extraction will be nil in the areas.

Specifically, the Council action includes all 16 seamounts in the EEZ off Alaska, named on NOAA charts (Bowers, Brown, Chirikof, Marchand, Dall, Denson, Derickson, Dickins, Giacomini, Kodiak, Odessey, Patton, Quinn, Sirius, Unimak, and Welker). All bottom contact fishing by Council-managed fisheries will be prohibited on these seamounts which total 5,329 nm<sup>2</sup>.

In Southeast Alaska, several recently discovered areas containing large aggregations ('thickets') of long-lived *Primnoa* coral, were also identified as HAPC. These areas, in the vicinity of Cape Ommaney and Fairweather grounds, total 67 nm<sup>2</sup>. All Council managed bottom-contact gear (longlines, trawls, pots, dinglebar gear, etc.) will be prohibited in five zones within these HAPC areas where submersible observations have been made. The area where bottom fishing will be prohibited totals 13.5 nm<sup>2</sup>.

In the Aleutian Islands region, the relatively unexplored Bowers Ridge, was also identified as HAPC, and as a precautionary measure, the Council acted to prohibit mobile fishing gear that contacts the bottom within this 5,286 nm<sup>2</sup> area.

In total, when combined with existing marine protected areas, bottom trawling will be prohibited year-round in over 388,600 nm<sup>2</sup>. This enormous area equates to the combined land area encompassed by the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Hawaii. Additionally, there are now 28 areas that have been essentially designated as 'marine reserves', where virtually all resource extraction of demersal species is prohibited. In total, the area encompassed by quasi 'marine reserves' off Alaska totals 5,456 nm<sup>2</sup>.