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## North Pacific Fishery Management Council October 2019 meeting in Homer

*By Ernie Weiss, AEB Natural Resources Director*

The NPFMC or Council, recently concluded the 246<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of the regional fishery management council tasked with recommending fishery management regulations for the North Pacific region, including for the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) and the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BSAI). The meeting was held September 30<sup>th</sup> through October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in Homer Alaska. The Council had a full and consequential agenda that elicited strong and sometimes passionate public comments and dialogue.

### **Final Actions at the NPFMC Oct 2019 meeting:**

**C2 Observer Fee Analysis** – The Council recommended the Observer fee, currently set at 1.25% of ex-vessel fish prices from the federal fisheries in the observer program, be raised to 1.65% across the gear types evenly. The fee is shared by processors and harvesters to pay for the partial coverage observer program. Also under this agenda item, the Council identified cost efficiency as their highest priority under the program noting that immediate efforts should focus on:

- Pelagic trawl EM combined with shoreside sampling.
- Integrated monitoring plan for fixed gear that combines EM, shoreside sampling, and at-sea observer coverage.
- Optimizing the size and composition of the fixed gear observed and EM fleets, including expansion of the zero-coverage pool to include vessels fishing from remote ports harvesting small amounts of fish.

The fee increase will not go into effect until at least 2021 to fund the 2022 Observer year.

**C7 Sculpins** – The Council also took final action to move sculpins from a target species to the non-target ecosystem component in both the GOA & BSAI, and allow a maximum retainable amount (MRA) of 20% during directed fishing for other species. If stakeholders, including processors and harvesters, become interested again in a directed sculpin fishery, sculpins could be returned to a directed fishery status through the normal Council process.

Crab Season	BB R King Crab	Snow (Opilio)	EB Bairdi (Tanner)	WB Bairdi (Tanner)
2012/2013	7,853,000 lbs	66,350,000 lbs	-	-
2013/2014	8,600,000 lbs	53,983,000 lbs	1,463,000 lbs	1,645,000 lbs
2014/2015	9,986,000 lbs	67,950,000 lbs	8,480,000 lbs	6,625,000 lbs
2015/2016	9,974,000 lbs	40,611,000 lbs	11,272,000 lbs	8,396,000 lbs
2016/2017	8,469,000 lbs	21,570,000 lbs	-	-
2017/2018	6,601,000 lbs	18,961,000 lbs	-	2,500,200 lbs
2018/2019	4,308,000 lbs	27,581,000 lbs	closed	2,439,000 lbs
<b>2019/2020</b>	<b>3,797,000 lbs</b>	<b>34,019,000 lbs</b>	<b>Closed</b>	<b>Closed</b>

**C4** Setting acceptable biological catch (ABCs) and overfishing levels (OFLs) for 5 BSAI crab stocks – Setting BSAI crab quotas is a long process that begins with the Council’s crab plan team, the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), the Council’s Advisory Panel (AP) and finally the Council adopts ABCs and OFLs as recommended. The 5 crab stocks set in October are EBS snow crab (opilio), Bristol Bay Red King Crab (BBRKC), EBS tanner crab (bairdi), St. Matthew Blue King Crab (SMBKC) and Pribilof Islands Red King Crab (PIRKC). Soon after the Council adopts the BSAI crab ABCs and OFLs, the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADFG) announces total allowable catch (TACs) for those crab species based on Council action. On October 6<sup>th</sup> ADFG announced TACs for the season opening October 15<sup>th</sup>: for BBRKC – 3.797 million lbs, and for opilio – 34.019 million lbs. Crab fishing for BS bairdi, STBKC and PIRKC will be closed for the 2019/2020 season. A TAC sheet is listed below for several species for each season since 2012.

**Other Oct 2019 NPFMC agenda items:**

The Council requested the **C1** BSAI Halibut Prohibited Species Catch (PSC) Abundance Based Management (ABM) analysis come back for another initial review, adding an alternative that allows the flexibility to adjust PSC rates mid-season, based on encounter rates.

**D2** BSAI Pacific Cod (Pcod) CV Mangt agenda item, to rationalize BSAI Pcod, garnered the most public comment testimony and letters. The Council motion for trawl vessels was based largely on the AP motion.

Under D2 Element 4 - GOA Sideboards, “AFA LLPs or CVs will be sideboarded as to all GOA fishing activity”... and “ Non-AFA LLPs would be sideboarded in the GOA...based on their GOA catch history during the qualifying years”

Under D2 Element 5 – Processor and Community Provisions, the Council motion includes options to allow allocation of harvester shares to processors, but the Council left out an AP suggested analysis of the applicability of a fishing community allocation, as provided for under MSA 303A(c)(3).

Under D2 Element 6 – Aleutian Island Processors Provisions, the Council motion provides for a percentage of the BSAI cod quota rather than a set amount (of 5000 mt) as a set-aside for Adak/Atka, so as not to overly impact other shore plants in Dutch Harbor, Akutan and King Cove that take BSAI Pcod for processing, in times of low abundance

**D1** Trawl electronic monitoring (EM) exempted fishing permit (EFP) – The SSC, AP and Council all recommended the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) approve the Trawl EM EFP submitted by United Catcher Boats, Alaska Groundfish Databank, Aleutians East Borough and Peninsula Fishermen’s Coalition. AEB Natural Resources Assistant Director Charlotte Levy helped develop and present the document. The EFP in conjunction with National Fish & Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) grants to the applicants, will help move forward incorporation of the use of EM on trawl vessels in place of human observers on vessels for compliance and data collection.

**C5 & C6** Groundfish Specifications for BSAI & GOA – The Council received a preliminary review at this meeting based on reports from the groundfish plan teams. There is some alarming news from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center – this from the Pcod assessment author Steve Barbeaux:

- GOA Pcod are currently at historic low abundance with low recruitment during the 2014-2016 heatwave.
- The stock will be very near or below B<sub>20%</sub> in 2020 (20% of the unfished biomass).
- Steller Sea lion rules require a closure of the directed fishery when the Pacific cod population reaches at or below B<sub>20%</sub> .
- If Pcod falls below B<sub>17.5%</sub>, a rebuilding plan will be needed.
- Conditions could improve after 2019 due to the assumed average cod recruitment.

Ecosystem Status Reports presented at the plan team meetings and to the NPFMC at this meeting included several ecosystem conditions red warning flags:

- The Gulf of Alaska has been experiencing another marine heatwave since September 2018, continuing through summer 2019.
- Low abundance of groundfish 2019 year classes, but 2018 pollock year class is “strong”.
- Second winter of little to no sea ice in the northern Bering Sea.
- Gray whale Unusual Mortality Event (UME) related to changes in the Bering Sea food web.
- 2019 had the second smallest cold pool in the Bering Sea.
- 2019 recorded the warmest bottom temperature in the Bering Sea.
- 2019 recorded the 2nd warmest surface temperature in the Bering Sea.

Final specifications for BSAI & GOA groundfish will be determined at the December meeting following the recommendations that come out of the November groundfish plan team meetings.

**C8** BSAI Pcod Parallel waters Limitation Initial review – The Council moved the analysis to close the ‘loophole’ in the BSAI parallel waters fishery to bring back for final action. This action will make the BSAI cod parallel fishery similar to the GOA parallel fishery, so that a vessel must have the proper LLP and endorsement or relinquish their FFP or LLP to fish in the parallel fishery.

**D4** BSAI Pcod Pot Catcher Processor – The Council action on D4 moves the discussion paper to an initial review analysis to eliminate some latent licenses in this fishery.

The Council also reviewed the draft Observer Annual Deployment plan for 2020, agenda item **C3**, with final approval scheduled for December.

The Council elected to take no further action on a discussion paper under **D3**, to examine Stranded Cod in the BSAI & GOA. The Council also heard the Cook Inlet Salmon FMP report from the Committee under **D5**.

Staff Tasking **E** item motions and recommendations - On the final day of the October meeting the Council passed the following Staff Tasking motions:

- A motion to allow species removed from target species to the ecosystem component, specifically sculpins and squid, to be processed for uses other than fishmeal.
- A motion to initiate a discussion paper for Aleutian Island Pcod management to address the Adak concerns for a pcod set-aside, as initiated in Amendment 113 and struck down by the US District Court.
- A motion for a strategic overview of observer committees, scheduling of committee meetings, prioritization of observer tasks and establishing a new partial coverage committee.
- A motion to initiate a discussion paper that would allow the under 60 fleet, primarily out of Unalaska and Akutan, to fish for Pcod with pots from the jig sector allocation, to preserve the small boat opportunity, including a trip limit of 15,000 lbs, a 25 pot limit and an under 57ft vessel limitation.

The Council also initiated several letters during Staff Tasking and the Chair announced several appointments to committees.

The full Council summary of the October 2019 meeting can be viewed [here](#) when it becomes available. [www.npfmc.org/npfmc-newsletters/](http://www.npfmc.org/npfmc-newsletters/) Motions when published are attached to the online [agenda](https://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/823). <https://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/823> The next NPFMC will be held at the Anchorage Hilton, December 2 – 10.

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