Quick Fix For BS Salmon Bycatch Unlikely

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Casey Kelly/KMXT

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council turned its attention to bycatch issues in the Bering Sea during its meeting at the Kodiak Inn yesterday (Thursday). The council is looking to curb the unintentional snaring of Chinook salmon by pollock boats in the Bering Sea, which has reached record levels in the past few years. KMXT’s Casey Kelly has more.

As a result of the Chinook bycatch, many commercial and subsistence fishermen have noticed fewer king salmon making their way to western Alaska’s river systems, from Norton Sound in the north all the way down to Bristol Bay. Last year was an all time record, with nearly 130-thousand king salmon being caught by the pollock fleet.

An environmental impact statement prepared by council and National Marine Fisheries Service staff looks at three broad possible solutions: a hard cap that would shut down the pollock fishery when bycatch reaches a certain level; triggered closures that would put certain areas off limits; or maintaining the status quo.

The council had wanted to develop a preliminary preferred alternative for analysis before the October meeting, which would ultimately lead to final action in December. However, that appears unlikely considering the number of questions council members had for staff when they reviewed the EIS report Thursday. Doug Mecum, head of NMFS in Alaska, said he had staff members staying up until two in the morning just to write the EIS, adding his most optimistic timeframe was to have a solution in place by summer 2010.

Ray Collins is a subsistence fisherman in McGrath and vice chair of the Western Interior Subsistence Resource Council. He expressed frustration with the slow process.

(Collins 1 :30s “…Yukon and Kuskowkwim.”)

Collins asked the council to set a hard cap at 29-thousand Chinook, which he says would

be close to the ten-year average taken by the pollock fleet between 1990 and 2000.

What’s more likely is that the council will ask for a case study looking at a range of alternatives from a hard cap of 87,500 kings to 47,600. That’s what the council’s Advisory Panel voted to recommend earlier this week. It’s also what is supported by the pollock industry. Stephanie Madsen is the executive director of the At-Sea Processors Association. She says the pollock fleet, through its cooperative fishing arrangements, is attempting to reduce king salmon bycatch on its own with rolling hot spots and closed areas where they don’t fish due to high abundance of Chinook.

(Madsen 1 :19s “…to reduce bycatch.”)

The North Pacific Council is scheduled to start discussing what action it wants to take on the Bering Sea bycatch issue when it reconvenes at 8 o’ clock this morning. The council is about a day behind on their agenda. The next issue on the table will be Bering Sea crab, which is expected to draw lots of attention from those in Kodiak who oppose the Crab Rationalization program.

I’m Casey Kelly.

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