Fish Council Focuses On BS Salmon Bycatch Solution

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Casey Kelly/KMXT

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, meeting in Kodiak today (Friday), narrowed down its options for reducing king salmon bycatch by the Bering Sea pollock fleet. The unintentional snaring of Chinook salmon by pollock boats has skyrocketed in recent years, and comes as subsistence and commercial fishermen in western Alaska have noticed less of the fish returning to their streams and river systems. KMXT’s Casey Kelly has more.

Last year was a record setting season for king salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery, with nearly 130,000 Chinook captured by the fleet’s trawl nets. Since pollock and salmon sometimes swim in the same ocean waters, it’s unlikely that bycatch will ever be eliminated entirely. But the North Pacific Council has been wrestling with how to curb the problem without costing the pollock fishery--the largest volume fishery in the U.S.--any of its catch.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Denby Lloyd, who represents the state on the council, made a motion to identify a preliminary preferred alternative, which will go forward for further analysis at future meetings.

(Lloyd 1 :21s “…come down off of those.”)

The state’s motion includes two possible scenarios with different overall caps, depending on what efforts that the pollock industry makes each year to provide incentives for its boats to fish cleanly. In one scenario, if the pollock industry fails to provide incentives to reduce bycatch, the cap is set at about 47,500 Chinook. However, if the industry does provide incentives, the cap will be about 68,000.

(Lloyd 2 :23s “…relief valve that’s warranted.”)

For boats that opt out of the incentives entirely, the overall cap is about 32,500, which means they would have to stop fishing once that level is reached by the entire fleet. Other provisions include allowing a boat to rollover 80 percent of its unused bycatch from the pollock fishery’s “A,” or winter fishing season to its summer “B” season, and sector level caps that allocates a percentage of the overall cap to the different sectors within the fishery.

The pollock industry wasn’t entirely happy with the preliminary alternative. Most agree that the fleet has done a good job so far this year of policing itself through rolling hotspots and fixed closures where high levels of Chinook are found.

John Gruver is with United Catcher Boats and is the inter-coop manger for the pollock fishery’s catcher vessel fleet. He says the industry would have preferred a higher cap, and he’s not sure about the feasibility of coming up with incentives that will work across all sectors.

(Gruver 1 :18s “…a very diverse industry.”)

But as with any good compromise, the other side wasn’t entirely satisfied either. Art Ivanoff is a subsistence fisherman from Unalakleet in Norton Sound. He says his and other western Alaska villages can’t stand to lose much more salmon.

(Ivanoff 1 :28s “…to make the right decision.”)

The council will have a chance to refine the preliminary alternative before final action is taken. The original plan was to adopt the final rule in December of this year. However, that timeline was pushed back until April 2009, meaning the cap won’t take effect until 2010 at the earliest.

I’m Casey Kelly.

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