

Fish Council Takes Baby Steps On GOA Groundfish

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Casey Kelly/KMXT

Although a comprehensive rationalized limited entry program for groundfish in the Gulf of Alaska is off the table at the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, the council continues to work on incremental steps that would limit the amount and scope of fishing effort. Two items in particular were on the table during this week's council meeting in Kodiak. KMXT's Casey Kelly has more.

In December 2006, at the request of Governor Sarah Palin, a plan to rationalize the Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries was put on hold by the North Pacific Council. Considering the problems with the Bering Sea crab rationalization program, council members decided to take a cautious approach to the gulf. However, Council Member Duncan Fields of Kodiak says many of the issues that were part of the comprehensive plan started to move independently.

1 (Fields :10s "rather than one large step.")

Two of those small steps came before the council this week. The first was a proposal to remove those gulf groundfish licenses from the pot, longline, and jig, or fixed gear sectors that don't have any recent catch history. The second is a proposal to create a sector split for Pacific cod in the gulf, which would divvy up the total allowable catch each season based on recent catch history and other factors. Fields says the two issues are related, and are thus they are moving through the council process mostly simultaneously.

2 (Fields :17s "economic advantage to that.")

There are close to 900 groundfish licenses in the gulf, but only 300 or so have any recent catch history. Still, much of the public testimony received by the council was opposed to straight up license removal. A variety of reasons were given for why people didn't want those 600 or so licenses retired, ranging from fishermen who just bought permits and haven't had time to make landings, to those who cited market forces keeping people from entering the fishery. Still others wanted endorsements that would restrict new entries into the lucrative gulf cod fishery, but allow people to keep their licenses to fish other groundfish species. Fisherman Dave Kubiak made a proposal that he thought would

be a good alternative.

1 (Kubiak :18s “…otherwise you become extinct.”)

Kubiak also proposed that the council look at capping vessel capacity, which he says is more concerning to him than a whole bunch of new people entering the fishery.

2 (Kubiak :15s “…capacity is going to balloon.”)

The council shared Kubiak’s capacity concerns in light of ample public testimony about a new class of 58-foot vessels, known as Super 8s, which have the ability to hold much more fish than your standard 58 footer. The council requested an analysis of capacity limits from its staff.

The P-cod sector split proposal also drew a difference of opinion from the public, especially on the question of whether or not it should be calculated based on directed catch alone, or if incidental catch should be included as well. Many fixed gear fishermen say it’s not fair to count the cod caught by the trawl fleet that wasn’t part of a directed fishery. Jeremy Pikus, a pot fisherman with the 58-foot Polar Star, tried to strike a compromise.

(Pikus 1 :26s “…across the board and apply that.”)

Pikus says he’s a bit disappointed by the sector split analysis requested by the council, because he says it took away the ability to compromise on directed versus indirect catch of cod.

(Pikus 2 :12s “…would end up being.”)

But Julie Bonney of the Alaska Groundfish Data Bank, who represents trawl vessel owners and local processors, says under the current proposal each sector is

responsible for their own incidental catch, which makes it necessary to include that catch in the historical calculation. She adds that another component that will be analyzed before the sector split is final is a provision that would move a sector's allocation up or down based on its ability to reduce bycatch.

1 (Bonney :26s "…that everybody can accept.")

The North Pacific Council is tentatively scheduled to continue working on these two issues through the rest of the year. Both are facing potential final action at the council's December meeting.

l'sm Casey Kelly.

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