

Chinook Bycatch Cap Looks Likely

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Jacob Resneck/KMXT

Federal regulators are moving toward setting a hard cap that would limit chinook salmon caught as bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council met over the weekend in Anchorage but final action will wait until June when the council reconvenes in Nome. The cap could come into effect as soon as next year. KMXT's Jacob Resneck has more.

-- chinook bycatch
pkg :3:29 "Bycatch of chinook ... I'm Jacob Resneck."

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council's staff analysis found that chinook bycatch follows predictable patterns with spikes coinciding with the Pollock fleet that trawl in the Gulf of Alaska.

Theresa Peterson of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council is one of those that had encouraged the council to set the cap at 15,000 fish. But the council opted to set the cap higher. 22,500 was the number agreed to on Saturday.

-- peterson2

Caps have been resisted by the Pollock industry. An alternative proposal would have created

mandatory cooperatives. These cooperatives would monitor bycatch numbers and allocate bycatch levels between vessels. But lawyers from the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration advised the council this structure wouldn't be legal as it would be devolving managerial powers from regulators to private industry.

-- bonney1

That's

Julie Bonney of the Alaska Groundfish Data Bank which advocates for the Pollock fleet. She predicted a cap would be difficult for the fleet as allocations for Pollock are on the rise.

-- bonney2

Local

returns of king salmon have been weak. That's triggered the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to limit this summer's king salmon sport fishery on the Karluk River to catch-and-release only. On the Ayakulik the bag limit will be one fish with a season maximum of two.

With

similar restrictions around the state, Peterson praised the council's apparent willingness to impose a cap as a way to help bring relief to faltering runs across Alaska.

-- peterson3

The

chinook bycatch plan would also extend observer coverage to under-60 foot vessels. None of this is final. The council will revisit the plan at its upcoming meeting in Nome.

Last

year's bycatch total of about 51,000 chinook automatically triggered consultation with Lower-48 fishery managers in accordance with the Endangered Species Act. That's because the Gulf of Alaska is a major feeding ground for salmon who return to rivers in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, California and Asia.

Yet how many chinook in the Gulf of Alaska are hatchery fish and how many are from wild rivers is still controversial. And it will take expanded genetic stock testing to better understand the origins of these fish.

I'm Jacob Resneck

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