Council Votes for 7,500 King Bycatch Cap

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This weekend, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council voted to put new restrictions on the Gulf of Alaska trawl fleet in an effort to curb chinook salmon bycatch.

There was almost certainly going to be a cap. All the other trawl fisheries had one, and concern over the health of Alaska's chinook runs has only increased in recent years. The question was just how much chinook salmon could the Gulf's trawl fleet take unintentionally before they would have to pull up their nets and stop fishing, period.

In the end, the number was 7,500 salmon.

"Certainly, the extent and depth of the chinook conservation crisis right now gives us no choice as a council but to respond with a conservation measure," said council member Bill Tweit, who represents the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The move wasn't without some disagreement. Bycatch in the fishery has fluctuated between 3,000 and 10,000 fish over the years. Conservation groups wanted a cap near the low end, while fleet representatives pushed for a limit closer to historical highs.

The Gulf of Alaska trawl fleet is made up of around 50 vessels. They fish on things like cod and rockfish, and they deliver that product to seafood processing plants in communities like Kodiak. Fleet representatives argued that a lower cap would put them at serious risk of fisheries closures, and that the economic harm would spread to the coastal towns that handle their catch.

Council Member Roy Hyder, with the Oregon Department of Fish and Game, was sympathetic to that argument.

"The person in Kodiak that doesn't get called by the processor to work on a line is the person that's going to pay the biggest price,” he said.

But council member and Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Cora Campbell responded that salmon fishermen had already experienced plenty of economic damage, and that a policy that wouldn't have required the trawl fleet to change its behavior wouldn't have been fair.

"If you set the hard cap at a level where it would not have constrained the fishery in the past 10 years, that is not a balanced approach. That is not sharing the burden of conservation between the trawl fleet and the directed salmon fishermen,” Campbell said. “What that is doing is ensuring that the burden of conservation continues to be shouldered entirely by the salmon-dependent users in the terminal fisheries."

The council ultimately approved the hard cap on a 10-1 vote. It's expected to take a year and a half before the policy is formally adopted by the federal government.