

Gulf Halibut Take Wing from ADQ to OTZ

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Jay Barrett/KMXT

An Air Station Kodiak C-130 Hercules took off Tuesday morning, headed for the Arctic Circle. It's not unusual this time of year as the Coast Guard continues increasing its presence in the far north, but this flight had aboard a little something extra: 13,000 pounds of filleted and vac-packed halibut.

The halibut is bycatch from trawlers delivering to Kodiak, and its shipment to Kotzebue was organized by Sea Share, a Bainbridge Island, Washington, organization that redirects fish that once was tossed overboard to food banks. In 20 years, Executive Director Jim Harmon says Sea Share has donated over 180-million seafood meals around the country.

He said the shipment of halibut from Kodiak to Kotzebue came about quickly after all the pieces fell into place. The Coast Guard flew some extra silver salmon from Kodiak to Kotzebue a few years ago.

"I know there's a vibrant Coast Guard Station here on Kodiak, so when we had excess fish here, I contacted them to see if they'd be willing to do it again," he said. "It took some time, but they were more than willing to do it. We had to wait for good weather; we had to wait for the season in order to have the fish available, so it kinda came to fruition here quickly in the last week."

Harmon said Ocean Beauty Seafoods processed the fish, and Carlile Transportation brought it from the cannery out to the air station where it met its flight. He said he had wanted to fly with the shipment, but it couldn't be arranged on such short notice.

He said Sea Share has only recently started working with fishermen and processors in the Gulf of Alaska.

"We had all of the trawl fleet in the Bering Sea participating in our bycatch retention program for years now. Three years ago we started signing up participants in the Gulf of Alaska, and we have I think seven processors and 60 or 70 boats from the gulf to retain salmon and halibut."

Though Sea Share sends Alaska bycatch all around the country, he says they like to give locally, first:

"Yeah, Kodiak's a great community and the processors here said 'we want to see these fish be used as locally as possible,' which Sea Share of course supports. The most efficient thing we can do is donate anything as locally as possible. In order to do that, we need to have the fish made into family-sized portions, either steaks or fillets — small enough packages that families can pick them up from any of the smaller food banks on the island. So we've been doing that for about three years."

The Kodiak halibut flight was expected to spend about two hours on the ground in Kotzebue, where food bank representatives were to split it up into smaller packages for further shipment to about a dozen surrounding villages.

