

Hilsinger Takes On Consulting for Crab Group

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John Hilsinger. (UAF photo)

Jay Barrett/KMXT

A long time Alaska fisheries biologist has signed on to be the new science advisor for a group of crabbers who ply their trade in one of the state's more far-flung fisheries. The Aleutian King Crab Research Foundation recently announced the hire of John Hilsinger, who will take over as consultant from Denby Lloyd.

"My job is to advise them. I work with the biologists from both the NMFS and Fish and Game, and other consultants, and advise them on projects and how those projects should be conducted so that we can get the information we need to develop a good long-term sustainable management regime for golden king crab."

Hilsinger says six boats have participated in the golden king crab fishery, which has been a directed fishery for more than 30 years, with a yearly harvest capped at 6-million pounds.

The Aleutian King Crab Research Foundation focuses on improving research into golden, and to a lesser extent, red king crab. Given the expense of sending test boats to survey the deep water crab that live amid underwater mountain ranges along the Aleutian Chain, the foundation has been trying to use fishermen to gauge recruitment.

"An example of an early projects of the foundations, they got 25 small-mesh pots. And one of the boats took out a Fish and Game biologist and they fished those pots over an area and actually demonstrated conclusively that there was a lot of small males and females. So that was a huge piece of information that made everyone more comfortable with the sustainability of the stock."

Hilsinger, who was a research and management biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game for nearly 40 years, is helping design a survey to learn more about the golden kings and perhaps allow an increase in the allowable harvest.

"We've already started to meet with both Fish and Game and National Marine Fisheries Service, so that as we design the survey, they will buy into it and accept it. That's a key part of it. Because it doesn't really do any good for the foundation to go out and do a survey and have the managers say, 'Well, we don't know how good that is,' so they're actually a part of the design of the survey."

Because of that, Hilsinger is confident the survey method will be acceptable to managers:

“By the time we would actually do it, there’s no doubt that it would be acceptable. Part of our plan is to try to develop a pilot project where we can go out and do this on a smaller scale and actually prove that it works before we expand it to a bigger area.”

Foundation

president Rip Carlton said that along with the ongoing crab stock assessment projects, the foundation also is participating in studies on golden king crab growth, handling mortality and what danger ocean acidification may pose. He said early findings indicate that golden king crab may be more resilient than other species.