

NORTH PACIFIC COUNCIL DEBATES CHINOOK BYCATCH IN POLLOCK FISHERY

At its recent February meeting the North Pacific Fishery Management Council ("the Council") continued its ongoing deliberations about chinook salmon bycatch by Alaska's pollock fishery, both in the Bering Sea and the Gulf of Alaska.

Both salmon and pollock swim in the middle depths of the ocean, so when the two species mix, the pelagic trawl nets targeting pollock inevitably scoop up salmon as bycatch. Although more chum salmon die in pollock nets than any other salmon species, chinook salmon is the main species of concern. It is the largest and rarest of the Pacific salmon species and is highly sought after, both for its eating quality and for the fight it offers recreational and sport fishermen. Coastal communities from Alaska south to California depend on chinook salmon for subsistence fisheries and sport fishing revenues.

The pollock fishery has always caught chinook and other salmon species as bycatch. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) – the organization that manages federal fisheries in the USA – tracks chinook bycatch and prohibits pollock fishing in a chum salmon conservation area during the month of August.

But salmon bycatch rates have increased in recent years, reaching a record 120,000 chinook in 2007. Research has shown that during the A-season (usually January 20th until early March) these chinook hail mainly from western Alaska, whereas during the B-season (June 10th until November 1st), they have a variety of origins, many of them from southern areas such as BC and California.

Fishermen in Alaska – the main salmon fishing jurisdiction – caught 560,000 chinooks in 2007, so bycatch of 120,000 fish is significant. Not only might this represent lost revenues for the salmon industry in the short term, but it may also threaten the reproductive capacity of the stocks.

The pollock fishery's escalating chinook bycatch and the potential downstream effects on the salmon industry have prompted calls for stricter bycatch rules. Conservationists suggest hard limits that, if reached, would close the pollock fishery much the same as halibut bycatch dictates the closure of many of Alaska's groundfish fisheries.

Especially in 2008, as they adjust to a drastic 27% cut to their quota, the companies involved in the pollock fishery are eager to find a solution that will not threaten to close their billion dollar fishery, although they acknowledge the need to reverse the recent increase in their chinook bycatch rates.

At its February meeting the Council refined proposed measures to reduce chinook bycatch. It will decide on the final version at a later meeting, but the current options include the following. Only the first option is labeled as "hard," so the three remaining proposals would potentially not close the pollock fishery if the stated limit were surpassed:

1. A hard cap based on historical bycatch averages from 1997-2006, with options from 3-10 years.
2. A cap based on the number of salmon returning to rivers and streams annually.
3. A cap based on the Incidental Take amount of 87,500 chinooks.
4. A cap based on historical bycatch averages prior to 2002 (i.e. 1992-2001)

On a positive note for both the pollock and salmon fishermen, NMFS reports much lower chinook bycatch for the 2008 pollock A-season compared to the same point last year:

CHINOOK SALMON BYCATCH IN BSAI POLLOCK FISHERY			
<i>all figures in number of fish</i>			
2008 week ending		2007 week ending	
na		20-Jan-07	1,492
26-Jan-08	5,349	27-Jan-07	19,447
02-Feb-08	1,635	03-Feb-07	10,679
09-Feb-08	1,894	10-Feb-07	9,541
Total	8,878		41,159

Sources: Seattle Times, NMFS, NPFMC, Alaska Department of Fisheries and Game

Implications for frozen seafood buyers:

- As with the producers, pollock buyers do not need another constraint on pollock supplies in the year of a 27% quota cut in Alaska.
- It appears that the fleet acknowledges the need to reduce its chinook bycatch, which raises hopes that the various stakeholders can find a cooperative solution that will not hurt either the salmon or pollock fisheries.

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val@tradexfoods.com	jeffrey@tradexfoods.com
linling@tradex.com	felix@tradexfoods.com