

## ALASKA'S POLLOCK AND SOCKEYE CATCHES LIKELY TO FALL IN 2009

Alaska's high value seafood species include crab, halibut, Pacific cod, pollock and sockeye salmon. Preliminary stock predictions suggest the state's commercial fishermen will have significantly less of two of these species – pollock and sockeye salmon – to catch in 2009.

### **Pollock**

Pollock catches represent approximately 40% of the world's whitefish supply. The vast stock in the Bering Sea straddles the border between Russia and Alaska. As recently as 2006, the quota in Alaska's main Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) fishing ground was 1.49 million metric tons (MT).

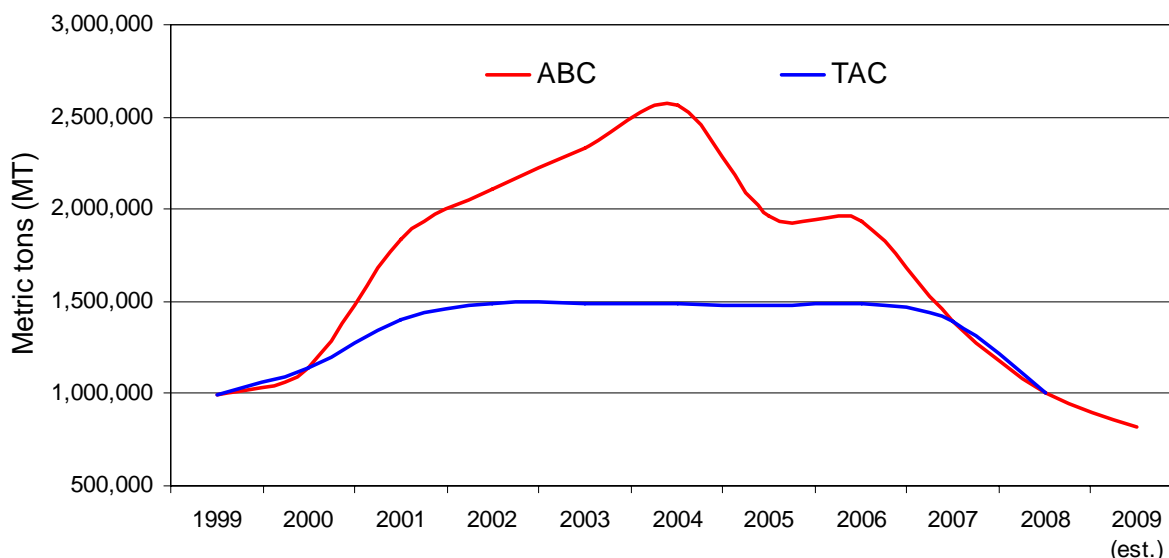
But what began as a cyclical decline in stocks became sudden drop in 2008, when the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (the Council) slashed the EBS pollock quota by 27% to one million MT.

Now preliminary biomass estimates from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) that manages the fishery suggest another large cut to the 2009 quota. NMFS uses bottom trawl surveys for its biomass estimates. The 2008 results show the lowest biomass levels in the last 10 years, similar to low levels in 2006:

NMFS SURVEY BIOMASS ESTIMATES, EBS, 1999-2008 <i>all figures in metric tons (MT)</i>	
Year	Total biomass
1999	3,800,717
2000	5,264,548
2001	4,199,909
2002	5,037,737
2003	8,457,662
2004	3,886,455
2005	5,293,715
2006	3,045,438
2007	4,337,542
2008	3,031,200
Avg. 1999-2008	4,635,492

From its biomass estimate, NMFS generates an Allowable Biological Catch (ABC). This is the maximum portion of the biomass that can be distributed as fishing quota. Here are the ABC and Total Allowable Catch (TAC, or "quota") for the last 10 years:

## EBS POLLOCK ABC AND TAC, 1999-2008



In general the Council sets the quota at the maximum ABC level when levels are low. If it continues this trend in 2009, a quota of 815,000MT would be an 18.5% drop from 2008 and would be the lowest quota in more than 30 years.

Despite the major cut to pollock quota last year and the likely cut in 2009, scientists and fisheries managers continue to claim that this is a normal cyclical fluctuation in stock levels. For example, the total female spawning biomass in the EBS pollock stock suggests a turnaround may start in 2010:

ESTIMATED FEMALE SPAWNING BIOMASS, EBS, 2008-2010	
<i>all figures in metric tons (MT)</i>	
Year	Total Female Spawning Biomass
2008	1,380,000
2009	1,486,000
2010	1,830,000

### Sockeye

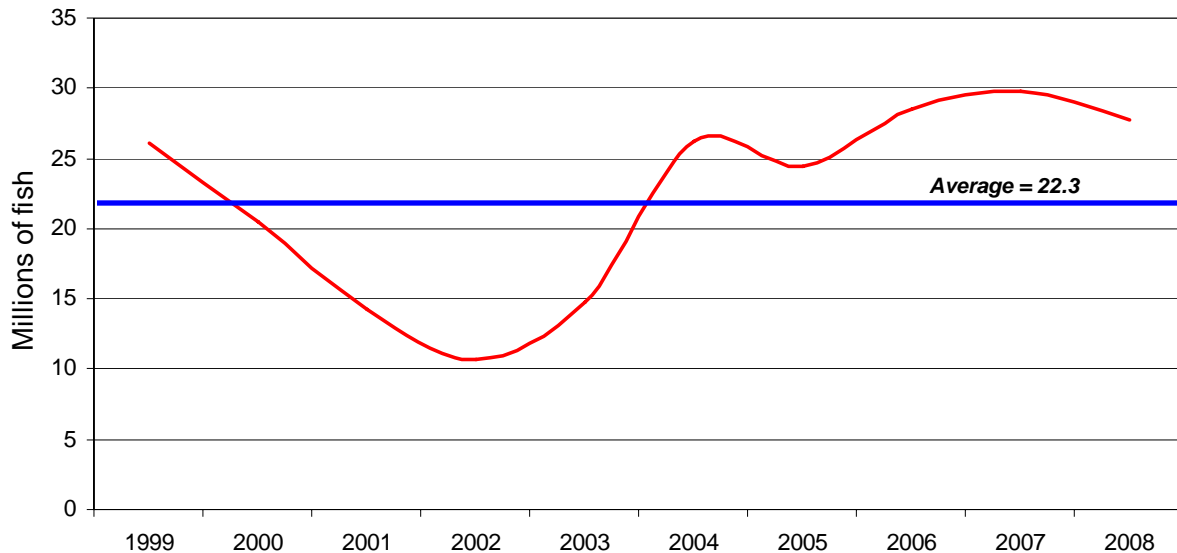
The Alaska Department of Fisheries and Game (ADF&G) predicts a sockeye salmon harvest of 25 million fish in the Bristol Bay subarea, a decline of 10% from last year's harvest. The agency has yet to release its statewide sockeye harvest predictions, but these will likely fall as well, as Bristol Bay is far and away the most important harvest subarea for this species. For example in 2007 Bristol Bay produced approximately 30 million fish compared to a statewide sockeye harvest of 47 million fish. Here is ADF&G's harvest calculation:

2009 BRISTOL BAY SOCKEYE RUN PROJECTION	
<i>all figures in millions of fish</i>	
Total run	33.8
Escapement	8.7
Commercial harvest	25.1

*Escapement: the minimum number of fish that must "escape" upriver to spawn*

A harvest of 25 million sockeye would be below the bumper harvests of the last three years, but would still surpass the 10-year average harvest of 22.3 million fish.

### BRISTOL BAY SOCKEYE SALMON CATCH, 1999-2008



In fact, Bristol Bay has enjoyed an unusual string of five consecutive strong sockeye runs. Since 2004 the average harvest has been 27.4 million fish. As the above chart shows, the Bristol Bay fishery is overdue for a natural downward correction in run strength.

Sources: NMFS, Puget Sound Business Journal, The Dutch Harbor Fisherman, ADF&G

*Implications for frozen seafood buyers:*

- The pollock market continues to adjust to the high prices and tight supply caused by the 27% cut to 2008 quotas.
- Another large quota cut will increase these pressures, likely causing another year of turmoil in pollock markets in 2009.
- The magnitude of these two consecutive cuts is such that the high prices and limited availability may force some buyers to consider substitute whitefish products.
- Bristol Bay sockeye are predominantly caught in nets in large volumes, so are not a direct comparison to, for example, low-volume troll sockeye fisheries elsewhere in the state.
- Nonetheless the Bristol Bay fishery is the dominant price setter for commodity raw material on the world sockeye market, so a 10% drop in Bristol Bay production will likely have some effect on prices for all sockeye products.

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