

SALMON BYCATCH SLOWS BERING SEA POLLOCK FISHERY

Fishing in the Bering Sea pollock fishery was worrying slow over its first three weeks of fishing. As of January 31st, the three components of the fishery – land-based catcher vessels, at-sea catcher-processors and at-sea motherships – had caught a mere 30,000 metric tons (MT) of pollock in their first two weeks of fishing. This is an extremely low total for what was until recently the world's largest volume food fishery and compares to a catch of 110,000MT after two weeks of fishing last year.

Several factors have contributed to the slow start. Among the minor ones are:

- The co-operative of vessels delivering pollock to the Unisea plant in Dutch Harbor, Alaska have been on strike since the A-season opened on January 20th, demanding the company boost their cut of profits from the current contract of 36% to what they claim is the industry standard of 36.5%.
- Pollock stocks have reportedly been slow to school, minimizing the catch per unit of effort.
- Halibut bycatch rates are as much as six times the historical average, an unfortunate time to increase since halibut bycatch quotas fell in 2009. This has implications for both the pollock and Pacific cod fisheries, as the halibut bycatch quota for the two fisheries are linked.

These factors aside, salmon bycatch is the fleet's main early season challenge. Bycatch for all five species of Pacific salmon is of concern, but the focus in recent years has been on the fleet's bycatch of the chinook species.

Because chinook is the least abundant and highest priced of the Pacific salmon species, it is well suited to small-scale fisheries. Small Alaskan communities, especially upriver on the long Yukon River, depend for their livelihoods on a variety of small sport, commercial and subsistence chinook fisheries. So valuable are the chinook fisheries that some coastal communities with both chinook and pollock fisheries have forsaken the pollock in favor of preserving the chinook and are pushing for hard salmon bycatch caps for the wider pollock fleet.

Unlike for halibut bycatch, there is no hard cap on salmon bycatch in the pollock fishery. In 2000, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (the Council) set a bycatch quota of 55,000 chinook, but did not include any binding penalties for exceeding this limit, so it has existed as more of a guideline.

Early season chinook bycatch rates are more than double the target rate. The fleet showed similarly high rates in 2007, when it caught 122,000 chinook for the year. But it brought this rate under control to 15,500 fish in the 2008 A-season, so captains have expressed surprise and concern at the return to high rates in 2009.

By almost all accounts, the pollock fleet has been earnest in its efforts to minimize its salmon bycatch. Of course the companies realize that dealing with this problem on their own is less restrictive than government regulation, but their continuing efforts to find a solution suggest a broader commitment to maintaining a balance between their livelihood and that of the communities that depend on chinook salmon.

Among other efforts, the pollock industry has spent millions of dollars to develop nets that more easily exclude salmon. And in recent years when they have found a high instance of salmon in their nets, they have stopped fishing and tried to find grounds with fewer chinook. But as in 2007, this year they have struggled to find grounds with high concentrations of pollock and low concentrations of salmon.

Outside of its own press releases, the industry has received praise for its efforts from state fisheries managers and environmental groups. For example in a November 2, 2007 article, the Anchorage Daily News quotes Bubba Cook of the World Wildlife Fund as saying about the pollock fleet's efforts to avoid salmon-rich grounds: "They are trying. They're trying to avoid them desperately. They just aren't able to do it."

The fleet first exceeded the 55,000-fish guideline in 2004, prompting the Council to begin reviewing stricter regulations such as: a chinook and chum salmon savings area with regulatory closures, hard

bycatch caps, or both. The process is ongoing, with the latest meeting finishing February 10th in Anchorage, Alaska.

During the current meeting the Council will hear two industry-proposed incentive programs – one for catcher vessels and the other for catcher-processors – designed to cut salmon bycatch.

Despite these industry efforts, it looks increasingly as if the Council will move to a system of hard caps, potentially to be implemented by 2011.

Sources: KUCB Unalaska Radio, Anchorage Daily News, North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Implications for frozen seafood buyers:

- Disruptions to pollock fishing have limited early season availability of new pollock production.
- This, along with the cut to Alaska's 2009 pollock quotas, has kept upward pressure on pollock prices.
- Strong pollock prices are an anomaly as the current economic downturn causes major price corrections for other whitefish species, most notably cod.
- Continued unsustainable salmon bycatch by the pollock fleet will inevitably have effects on the availability of Alaskan salmon products as well.
- Despite these threats, Alaska's fishery management is among the world's most committed to conservation of its resource, so its chances of resolving these problems are as strong as possible.

greg@tradexfoods.com

val@tradexfoods.com

jeffrey@tradexfoods.com

susan@tradexfood.com

felix@tradexfoods.com

alejandra@tradexfoods.com

Visit www.tradexfoods.com or contact your Tradex Foods account manager.