

Executive Summary

The king and Tanner crab fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) (3 to 200 miles offshore) of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) off Alaska are managed under the Fishery Management Plan for Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands King and Tanner Crabs (FMP). The FMP establishes a State/Federal cooperative management regime that defers crab fisheries management to the State of Alaska (State) with Federal oversight. State regulations are subject to the provisions of the FMP including its goals and objectives, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and other applicable Federal laws.

This proposed action is a revised rebuilding plan for the Pribilof Islands blue king crab (PIBKC) stock. The PIBKC stock remains overfished. The purpose of this proposed action is to reduce the risk of overfishing the PIBKC stock by developing an amended rebuilding plan for this stock in compliance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act and the national standard guidelines.

Five alternatives are considered in this analysis. Four of the alternatives consider time and area closures to better protect the PIBKC stock. The fifth alternative considers trigger caps and associated time and area closures in groundfish fisheries which have contributed historically to bycatch of this stock. Alternatives 2-5 retain all of the current protection measures in place for the PIBKC stock and apply additional measures as described in the specific alternatives and options.

Alternative 1 retains the current Pribilof Islands Habitat Conservation Zone (PIHCZ) trawl closure around the Pribilof Islands. Alternative 2 applies the PIHCZ closure additionally to those groundfish fisheries contributing to PIBKC bycatch (Option 2a) or to fishing for Pacific cod (*Gadus macrocephalus*) with pot gear (Option 2b). Alternative 3 proposes to apply the existing State of Alaska (State) crab closure areas to those groundfish fisheries contributing to PIBKC bycatch (Option 3a) or to fishing for Pacific cod with pot gear (Option 3b). Alternative 4 proposes two closure configurations to cover the distribution of the PIBKC stock. These closures are then proposed to apply to either those groundfish fisheries contributing to PIBKC bycatch (Option 4a) or to fishing for Pacific cod with pot gear (Option 4b). Alternative 5 proposes a trigger cap on those groundfish fisheries contributing to PIBKC bycatch that, if reached, would close that area to fishing (Options 5a-5d). For each of Alternatives 2-5, there is the option of increasing observer coverage, either to all fisheries to which a cap or closure applies (Option 1), or to specific fisheries (Option 2).

Analysis of the impacts of these closure configurations on the rebuilding potential for the PIBKC stock shows limited effect on rebuilding between the ranges of alternative closures. Initial review is scheduled for December 2010.

D-1 (a) Preliminary Review Pribilof Islands blue king crab rebuilding

The Council adopts the following problem statement and moves the following recommendations to be incorporated into the initial review draft of the analysis, as specified below.

Problem Statement

The Pribilof Islands blue king crab stock remains overfished and the current rebuilding plan has not achieved adequate progress to rebuild the stock by 2014. In order to comply with provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) an amended rebuilding plan must be implemented prior to the start of the 2011/2012 fishing season.

The directed blue king crab fishery has been closed since 1999 and action has been taken to limit bycatch mortality in other crab fisheries occurring near the Pribilof Islands; however no similar action has been taken for groundfish fisheries. Recent trends in crab bycatch suggest that groundfish fisheries occurring near the Pribilof Islands have the potential to exceed the annual overfishing level and acceptable biological catch for this stock.

This action is necessary to facilitate compliance with requirements of the MSA to end and prevent overfishing, rebuild overfished stocks and achieve optimum yield.

This problem statement reflects not only the Council's obligation under MSA to rebuild this stock, but also our desire to prevent overfishing on an annual basis and ensure that all fisheries contributing blue king crab bycatch mortality share in the rebuilding effort.

Recommendations for the initial review draft

Remove Alternative 5 and remove from consideration for closures any fisheries which have not contributed to PIBKC bycatch since 2003.

Add a suboption to both Options 1 and 2 of "Option for Increased Observer coverage" (section 2.7): This would sunset under implementation of the restructured observer program.

Evaluate the current B_{MSY} estimate to determine if it is a reasonable benchmark for rebuilding under current environmental conditions. The rebuilding plan should be flexible enough to accommodate an improved estimate of B_{MSY} that may be available from the developing blue king crab assessment model without requiring a plan amendment.

Refine the description of the caps under Alternative 6 to indicate that the cap is the bycatch component of the OFL.

The analysis should consider spatial overlap of blue king crab and red king crab, and analyze impact of current blue king crab current protection measures on the Pribilof red king crab fishery.

October 11, 2010

The Council requests its Crab Plan Team to conduct a thorough assessment of the stock structure of the Blue King Crab biomass on the Eastern Bering Sea shelf. This assessment should be based on analysis of recruitment patterns by Zheng and Kruse, the work of Mueter on climate forcing on the distribution of subarctic species, and any other research and survey results that the crab plan team believes is relevant.