

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members

FROM: Clarence G. Pautzke
Executive Director



ESTIMATED TIME
2 HOURS

DATE: August 23, 2000

SUBJECT: Cook Inlet Non-pelagic Trawl Ban

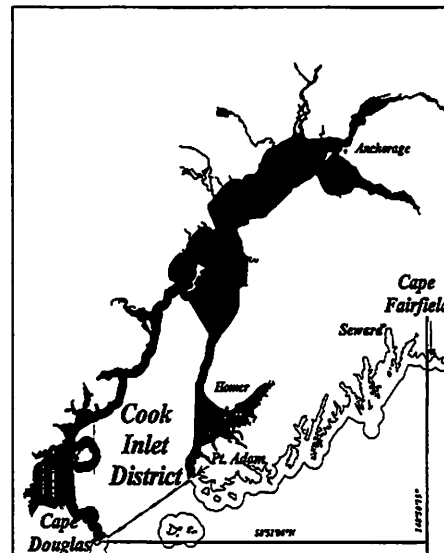
ACTION REQUIRED

Final action to prohibit the use of non-pelagic trawl gear in Cook Inlet.

BACKGROUND

Cook Inlet non-pelagic trawl ban

At its October 1998 meeting, the Council approved a groundfish proposal submitted by ADF&G and requested that staff prepare an analysis of alternatives to prohibit the use of non-pelagic trawl gear in federal waters of Cook Inlet in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA). To protect and promote rebuilding of king and Tanner crab resources, the Alaska Board of Fisheries prohibited the use of non-pelagic trawl gear in state waters of Cook Inlet. However, a significant portion of critical habitat for these crab resources occurs in federal waters of Cook Inlet. Although little fishing effort has occurred with this gear, previous efforts to prohibit non-pelagic trawling in this habitat have largely been reactive. Greater long-term, proactive protection is needed for this habitat to promote rebuilding of these resources. The EA/RIR for this change to the GOA FMP analyzes seven alternatives for limiting the impact of gear on crabs in the federal portion of Cook Inlet in the GOA.



The public review draft of the analysis was mailed to you on August 3. The executive summary is attached as Item C-4(a). The following alternatives were included in the analysis.

- Alternative 1: No action.
- Alternative 2: Prohibit the use of non-pelagic trawl in Federal waters of Cook Inlet.
- Alternative 3: Defer management of groundfish in Federal waters of Cook Inlet to the State of Alaska.
- Alternative 4: Remove waters of Cook Inlet from the Gulf of Alaska FMP.
- Alternative 5: Require observer coverage in Federal waters of Cook Inlet.
- Alternative 6: Implement time and area closures.
- Alternative 7: Require an ADF&G Commissioner's Permit.

The Council approved the draft analysis for public review at its October 1999 meeting, pending recommended changes by the AP and SSC. The AP recommended deleting an eighth alternative to establish Cook Inlet as a marine reserve. The SSC minutes from its last review in April 1999 are attached below. All recommended changes were made by the authors.

SSC excerpt:

D-1(c) PROHIBIT NON-PELAGIC TRAWL GEAR IN COOK INLET

Bill Bechtol of ADF&G presented the EA/RIR/IRFA for a proposed amendment to ban non-pelagic trawl gear in Cook Inlet. No public testimony was received.

Historically, there has been very little non-pelagic trawl activity in Cook Inlet. The intent of the action proposed here is to minimize impacts on the brood stocks of Cook Inlet king and Tanner crab stocks. There has been no commercial harvest of king crab from Cook Inlet since 1984 and no commercial harvest of Tanner crab since 1994.

The SSC finds that the document is generally well structured and recommends it be released for public comment conditioned upon addition and expansion of the following discussion points:

- 1. There is no discussion of economic opportunities foregone due to closure of the area to non-pelagic trawling.*
- 2. A listing of the groundfish composition in the region should be included as well as any survey data from the region.*
- 3. The ADF&G has already closed state waters in Cook Inlet to non-pelagic trawling. A description of the proportion of total crab habitat and/or biomass that remains vulnerable to impact from bottom trawling would be helpful, i.e., identification of the fraction of the crab resource found in federal waters.*
- 4. A figure showing trawl survey locations used to compute the trawl survey index should be added.*
- 5. The decline in both the king and Tanner crab stocks has occurred at the same time as declines in many of the other crustacean stocks in the Gulf of Alaska. The document should discuss these declines in a broader ecosystem context.*
- 6. A ban on trawling around Kodiak Island was instituted following collapse of those king crab stocks in the early 1980's. To date, those stocks have not recovered. It is likely that rebuilding of these stocks may await improved environmental conditions. The proposed activity is a proactive measure whose intent is to preserve brood stock such that the populations are able to take advantage of a crab-favorable change in the environment.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Magnuson-Stevens Act emphasizes the importance of bycatch effects on achieving sustainable fisheries. National Standard 9 mandates that conservation and management measures shall, to the extent practicable: minimize bycatch; and to the extent bycatch cannot be avoided, minimize the mortality of such bycatch. This analysis addresses the use of non-pelagic trawl gear in Federal waters of Cook Inlet in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) north of a line from Cape Douglas to Point Adam. This area is currently managed as part of the Central Regulatory area in the GOA. Historically, Cook Inlet supported significant fisheries for King and Tanner crab and currently supports limited fisheries for Pacific cod. King and Tanner crab resources in the Cook Inlet portion of the GOA remain depressed. King crab fisheries have remained closed since 1984. Commercial Tanner crab fisheries have remained closed since 1994. Due to the absence of Federal management of crab stocks in the GOA prior to August 1, 1996, the State has jurisdiction for managing all crab stocks in the GOA EEZ.

To protect and promote rebuilding of King and Tanner crab resources, the Alaska Board of Fisheries prohibited the use of non-pelagic trawl in state waters of Cook Inlet. However, a significant portion of critical habitat for these crab resources occurs in Federal waters of Cook Inlet. Although little fishing effort has occurred with non-pelagic trawl gear, previous efforts to prohibit non-pelagic trawling in this habitat have largely been reactive. Greater long-term, proactive protection is needed for this habitat to promote rebuilding of these resources. This EA/RIR/IRFA for Plan Amendment 60 to the GOA Fishery Management Plan analyzes seven alternatives for gear specifications for the Cook Inlet portion of the GOA:

Alternative 1: No action.

Alternative 2: Prohibit the use of non-pelagic trawl in Federal waters of Cook Inlet.

Alternative 3: Defer management of groundfish in Federal waters of Cook Inlet to the State of Alaska.

Alternative 4: Remove waters of Cook Inlet from the Gulf of Alaska FMP.

Alternative 5: Require observer coverage in Federal waters of Cook Inlet.

Alternative 6: Implement time and area closures.

Alternative 7: Require an ADF&G Commissioner's Permit.

The status quo alternative was not recommended by the State of Alaska as it would allow crab stocks to continue to be vulnerable to bycatch mortality by non-pelagic trawling in Federal waters of Cook Inlet.

Alternative 2, the preferred alternative of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), would prohibit the use of non-pelagic trawl gear in Federal waters of Cook Inlet and implement consistent gear restrictions with the Alaska Board of Fisheries (Board) in State waters of Cook Inlet to optimize protection and rebuilding of crab resources. The proposed gear ban in Federal waters would provide long-term protection to depressed King and Tanner crab resources in Cook Inlet and would provide concurrent management approaches with ADF&G. Because minimal fishing using non-pelagic trawl gear has occurred in this area, there are no existing fisheries to affect.