

1986 ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES
DECISIONS REGARDING
KING AND TANNER CRAB MANAGEMENT

During its March 1986 meeting in Anchorage and Sitka, the Board of Fisheries adopted proposals affecting new regulations in the king crab and Tanner crab fisheries. In considering regulatory modifications, the board recognized its responsibility to manage the resource consistent with the fishery management plans as well as direct attention to areas where deficiencies in these plans currently exist. The following board decisions represent all the regulations adopted for king and Tanner crab.

KING CRAB

The most significant board decisions did not specifically affect the directed king crab fisheries, but instead involved a rather complex group of regulations aimed at reducing the bycatch of king crab in the trawl fisheries for bottomfish. In adopting these regulations the board recognized:

- 1) that mortality rates on soft crab in the cod end of nonpelagic trawls is unacceptably high and that there are additional mortalities, though at a lower incidence, among hard crab captured by the trawl, and
- 2) that nonpelagic trawl gear, by nature of its operation, probably inflicts significant mortalities among crab hit by the otter doors and associated rigging but not picked up by the trawl.

The board felt that the onus should be placed on the trawl fleet to demonstrate how, when and where nonpelagic trawl gear can be operated without significant impacts on crab, and that this general philosophy is consistent with the approach taken for any new and developing fishery. The board also concurred that the critically depressed status of crab populations throughout Alaska necessitated the adoption of interim protection measures to minimize potential crab losses in the trawl fisheries. Consistent with this general intent, the board adopted the following regulations.

(1) Areas king crab normally occupy in Kodiak, Bristol Bay, the Alaska Peninsula, and the Aleutian Islands were closed to nonpelagic trawling, some on a year-round basis and others only during the spring molting season. In areas not closed, the operation of trawl gear requires a permit issued by the Commissioner. The permit may stipulate times and location for trawl gear operation and impose bycatch limits. (See 5 AAC 39.164).

(2) To facilitate data gathering and more effective future management of the trawl fleet, mandatory onboard observer coverage in the trawl fleet was required subject to the board's future compliance with AS 16.05.251(a) (12) which requires certain board findings before observer coverage can be mandated. Costs for these observers will be the responsibility of the vessel owners (see 5 AAC 39.163).

(3) To facilitate more effective tracking and management of nonpelagic trawl operations, bottomfish vessel registration was required for vessels fishing in state waters (see 5 AAC 39.330).

In addition to requiring onboard observers in the nonpelagic trawl fisheries, the board also recognized the need for onboard observers on certain crab catcher/processors that may otherwise process sublegal and female king and Tanner crab without risk of being apprehended. The board, therefore, adopted a regulation requiring, again subject to AS 16.05.251(a) (12), observers for catcher/processors which the Commissioner determines might not be operating in full compliance with regulations protecting the crab resource. Costs for the observer will be the responsibility of the vessel operator. Carpace retention was included as an option that vessel operators can elect if observer coverage is infeasible (see 5 AAC 39.645).

In concluding its regulatory actions for king crab, the board also adopted several "house cleaning" proposals. One clarified board intent that king crab may only be taken by king crab pots. The previous regulatory language had inadvertently left open the possibility of using other pot gear. The second proposal repealed a requirement for registering gear used to take king crab. The regulation was believed unenforceable and unnecessary. No changes in

fishing seasons or guideline harvest ranges for king crab were adopted by the board this year.

Tanner Crab

The same two housecleaning regulatory changes mentioned above for the king crab fishery were also adopted for the Tanner crab fishery.

In Southeast Alaska, Area A, the board adopted a new Tanner crab fishing season of January 15 through May 1 for the Southeastern portion. The season previously opened on February 10. In moving the opening to January the board hoped to avoid problems with soft crab and make the opening consistent with the Westward Region and Yakutat opening dates. A revised guideline harvest maximum of 2 million pounds for the Southeastern portion and 1 million pounds for the Yakutat portion was adopted. These lower maximums were adopted to better reflect the current depressed status of Southeast Alaska Tanner crab stocks and to adjust future maximum harvest rates to levels that would reduce the likelihood of overharvest.

The board also adopted a regulation effective July 1, 1987 for Area A requiring that escape rings be located, in their entirety, within 8 inches of the bottom of the pot. This was done to avoid problems with installing escape rings at a height that made them useful only when the pot was full. Tanner crab in-water pot storage in the Southeastern portion of Area A for 10 days before the season opening was authorized by the board. Areas open to pot storage are limited to waters less than 10 meters in depth and no storage is allowed within 10 miles of a community or within 500 yards of an anadromous stream. A permit from Fish and Wildlife Protection must be obtained before pots may be stored. The board believed that preseason pot storage would reduce likelihood of accidents from overloaded vessels and improve fair start up of the fishery, and that limitations on time and areas open to storage would minimize public objections and other potential user conflicts. The same pot storage regulation was also adopted for king crab.

In Cook Inlet the Tanner crab season was delayed from its November 1 opening. The season will now be January 15 through April 30 in the Southern District

and January 15 through May 31 elsewhere in Area H. The board found strong industry support for this proposal, largely based on a better product and recovery rate, and a lack of biological or management problems.

To avoid gear crowding the board opted in favor of a proposal to limit registered vessels to a 75 king and Tanner crab pots in Kachemak Bay during the Tanner crab season. The board also adopted a requirement that Tanner crab pots used in Area H have two 4 3/4-inch escape rings. Little industry opposition was voiced, and testimony indicated that escape rings used elsewhere in Alaska were effective in reducing capture of sublegal crab. This, in combination with department staff testimony on the high capture rate of sublegal crab in Area H, prompted the boards decision to require escapement rings.

In the Northern Subdistrict of the Bering Sea, the board eliminated year round Tanner crab pot storage in state waters 25 fathoms or less in depth. This decision reflected previous conflicts with the St. Matthew king crab fishery which had been hampered by stored Tanner crab pots preempting the king crab fishing grounds.