



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
P.O. Box 21668  
Juneau Alaska 99802-1668

E1 PIBKC Rebuilding  
December 2019

December 5, 2019

Mr. Simon Kinneen, Chair  
North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Chairman Kinneen:

This letter provides notification that Pribilof Islands blue king crab (PIBKC) (*Paralithodes platypus*) continues to be in overfished status in 2019 with no progress towards rebuilding. Overfishing did not occur in the 2018/19 season.

The PIBKC stock remains overfished and available information does not show signs of rebuilding. This stock has been under a rebuilding plan since 2004. The 2004 rebuilding plan estimated a 50 percent probability of rebuilding within ten years. However, the stock did not show signs of rebuilding within the ten-year timeframe and the Council and NMFS revised the rebuilding plan in 2014. The new rebuilding plan included closing the Pribilof Islands Habitat Conservation Zone (PIHCZ) to pot gear targeting Pacific cod to protect blue king crab habitat and minimize bycatch in the Bering Sea groundfish fisheries. The PIHCZ encompasses the core area of the PIBKC stock, and has been closed to trawl gear since 1995.

Due to declining stocks, directed fishing for PIBKC has been closed since 1999. In addition, directed fishing has been closed for Pribilof Islands red king crab since 1999 to minimize bycatch of blue king crab. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game also annually closes specific State statistical areas where PIBKC are known to occur in all crab fishing.

Based on the best available information on the biology of the stock and environmental conditions, NMFS estimates that the time period to rebuild the stock will exceed 10 years. The causes of the stock decline are thought to be predominantly due to environmental changes that inhibit blue king crab reproduction. For this stock to rebuild, the stock would likely require multiple years of above average recruitment and/or a change in environmental conditions to increase larval productivity around the Pribilof Islands.

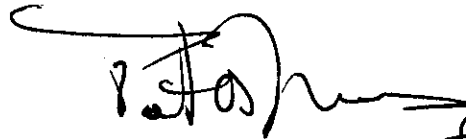
NMFS developed a draft stock assessment model that predicted that the PIBKC stock may be rebuilt in 50 years. However, the low numbers of PIBKC encountered in biomass surveys and the poor ability to predict recruitment results in high imprecision in the projected biomass. The model imprecision, coupled with poorly understood environmental influences on the blue king crab stock, did not lead to high confidence in biomass projections during the 50-year period. As a result, NMFS is unable to predict whether the PIBKC stock can be rebuilt in the foreseeable future.



The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires the Council and NMFS prevent overfishing from occurring. We propose that we continue to monitor PIBKC bycatch inseason during the groundfish fisheries. If PIBKC bycatch approaches the acceptable biological catch during a crab fishing year, we will use the inseason management authority at 50 CFR 679.25 to publish a notification in the Federal Register specifying inseason adjustments to prevent overfishing of PIBKC. With this flexible approach, we will be able to make precise inseason closures that apply to vessels fishing for Bering Sea groundfish with bottom contact gear when necessary to prevent overfishing. We use this same approach to prevent overfishing of groundfish stocks. In addition, the stock will remain under the new rebuilding plan until it is rebuilt to the rebuilding target.

We look forward to working with the Council to monitor the status of the rebuilding plan and to ensure that overfishing does not occur for PIBKC.

Sincerely,



James W. Balsiger for JB  
Administrator, Alaska Region