Pacific Northwest Crab Industry Advisory Committee (PNCIAC)
Meeting Minutes and Recommendations
March 2, 2022 9-10:30am AKT

ATTENDEES

Committee Members:
Lance Farr (Chair), Steve Minor (Vice Chair), Jamie Goen (Secretary, non-voting), Jake Jacobsen, Gary Painter, Edward Poulsen, Dean Fasnacht, Elizabeth Reed, Mark Casto, Sean Dwyer
(*Committee members not in attendance*: Mike Simpson, Brett Reasor)

Others in Attendance:
Sarah Marrinan (Council staff), Brian Garber-Yonts (NMFS), Doug Duncan (NMFS), Henry Tashjian

AGENDA

1. March 2022 Board of Fisheries Proposals
2. Shifting crab stocks and boundary issues
3. Opilio rebuilding
4. Bristol Bay Red King Crab discussion papers
5. Bairdi industry preferred size
6. Season start date
7. Elections for 2022
8. Other business

MINUTES

7. Elections for 2022

This agenda item was taken out of order at the start of the meeting. The current chair, Lance, noted it had been some time that harvesters were the chair of PNCIAC and suggested it was time for a processor representative to chair. **Motion to nominate Steve Minor with Peter Pan Seafoods as chair** (motion Edward Poulsen, second Elizabeth Reed). Motion passed unanimously. Jamie to remain Secretary.

1. March 2022 Board of Fisheries Proposals

There is only one proposal affecting Bering Sea and Aleutian Island (BSAI) crab fisheries this cycle.

275: Onboard observer certification and decertification. This proposal was submitted by ADFG and would extend the observer certification expiration period from 12 to 18 months. This proposal is intended to help retain good observers.

The group noted they would like to show support for this proposal. **Motion for PNCIAC to send a letter of support to the Board of Fisheries for Proposal 275** (motion Jake Jacobsen, second Elizabeth Reed). Motion passed unanimously. Steve and Jamie will draft a letter, send for review, and submit.

2. Shifting crab stocks and boundary issues

Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC) – Red king crab are north and northwest of BBRKC Zone 1 and aren't counted in the stock assessment model or against PSC limits. Recent years surveys show BBRKC are shifting north. Uncertain how much those crabs move north and south of the Zone 1 line and how much the northern crab are contributing to the spawning stock biomass. The Bering Sea Research Foundation (BSFRF) is doing some tagging work to better understand. PNCIAC is interested in the results from the tagging data once available. Noted that these are changing times with changing temperatures, changing climate, and changing predators. The management process needs to adapt to changing conditions and stocks that are moving.

Noted that ADFG has commented in the past that given the conservation concern of the stock, this is not the time to shift the boundary.

As a starting point for addressing BBRKC boundary issues, **PNCIAC plans to review the analysis for the April North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting under the BBRKC discussion paper agenda item and provide a letter of comment.** Using information from the analysis, PNCIAC will determine if there is information to recommend a new boundary line to be considered. Because the BSAI crab fishery management plan (FMP) is under federal authority, PNCIAC plans to start through the Council process to address boundary issues and then ask for state coordination, as needed. PNCIAC will coordinate a comment letter via email.

Closed areas around the Pribilof Islands - There are slightly different closed area boundaries around the Pribilofs for groundfish versus crab fisheries. For crab, the "homeplate" closed area is defined by ADFG to protect blue king crab and can change annually based on survey information. For groundfish, the Pribilof Island Habitat Conservation Zone (PIHCZ) is defined in federal regulation. Both closed areas are to protect crab and crab habitat and should be consistent. PNCIAC noted it is weird when crabbers are outside of homeplate and a trawler is 8 miles inside. Comment that removing cod, a predator, from inside the closed areas is beneficial to crab but trawling in there is not great for crab or the habitat. Noted that most of cod trawl is happening elsewhere but other trawlers are inside homeplate on the eastern side, across the top, and the SW corner. **PNCIAC plans to ask for consistency in the closed area around the Pribilofs to protect crab and crab habitat with the larger of the two areas used to set the boundary.**

Bering Sea snow crab (BSS) – The NMFS survey include information for snow crab from both the Eastern Bering Sea (EBS) and Northern Bering Sea (NBS). However, to date, only the EBS data is used for the stock assessment. Both EBS/NBS are thought to be one contiguous stock, recognizing that crab to the north tend to be smaller. PNCIAC noted that BSAI crab quota extends into the NBS to the southern boundary of the Arctic FMP but need to assess where the state registration boundaries are for snow crab. Although crab fisheries are traditionally in the EBS, with stocks moving north and temperatures warming, that may change.

Prohibited species catch (PSC or bycatch) caught outside of the defined boundary of C. Opilio Crab Bycatch Limitation Zone (COBLZ) does not count toward PSC limits. PNCIAC members noted that bycatch throughout the stocks range should count towards PSC limits, both inside and outside of COBLZ. If a limit is reached and action needs to be taken, it makes sense that just COBLZ would be closed as the recent Council analysis on crab PSC limits showed most of the BSS stock and bycatch is within COBLZ. By doing it this way, trawl fisheries would still have a place to fish even if a PSC limit is reached while minimizing impacts on crab.

PNCIAC noted that the survey should include deeper waters close to Russia line where BSS was found in recent seasons. NBS needs to be incorporated into stock assessments and NMFS should continue annual NBS surveys. Bycatch throughout a stock's range should count toward that sector's PSC limits.

3. Opilio rebuilding

The Council received an update on opilio rebuilding at their February meeting and delayed selecting a range of alternatives until their June meeting. This was because the stock assessment needed more work before being used to select rebuilding timelines. The stock assessment is transitioning from a status quo model to GMACs which will be reviewed at the May Crab Plan Team meeting and used for developing rebuilding alternatives at the June Council meeting. The Council will have an initial review of the rebuilding plan at their October meeting. The Council and NMFS have two years from when the stock was declared overfished (Oct 2021) to implement a rebuilding plan.

PNCIAC plans to meet again in late May and before June Council meeting to discuss further.

4. Bristol Bay Red King Crab discussion papers

The Council will review the BBRKC discussion paper at their April meeting. The discussion paper will include the boundary issues discussed previously at this PNCIAC meeting, among other topics. **PNCIAC will work over email to review the discussion paper once available and to develop a comment letter to the Council, if desired.**

5. Bairdi industry preferred size

This is a Board of Fisheries and not a Council issue, however, it may affect stock assessment models and Crab Plan Team work.

There has been some talk within industry about reducing the market-preferred size limit (5 inches) to the legal size, which is 4.8 inches in the East and 4.4 in the West. Some smaller crab were landed this year. Many years ago, the bairdi market-preferred size went from 5.5 to its current 5 inches.

A retrospective analysis showed that this change would not have made a difference to the TAC in most years. In the east, it would have resulted in a different TAC in 1 year out of 45 years, and, in the west, in 13 years of those years. While it comes in pulses, when a year is triggered where it would have changed the TAC, it can make a substantial difference, on the order of a 40% increase.

Any changes must be based on science to make sure this action would not harm the stock. Some noted concern that taking crab selecting for the largest crabs could be changing genetics of the biomass to favor smaller crab.

Next steps for this issue are for the industry Ad-hoc Bairdi Committee, with representatives from harvesters, processors, and communities, to engage on this issue over the summer. The Ad-hoc Committee successfully worked through the recent bairdi harvest strategy updates through the Board of Fisheries.

For now, this is an informational item for PNCIAC.

6. Season start date

Council staff asked about the feasibility of a later crab season start date after Oct 15 as the Council is considering streamlining processes and changes to their meeting schedule, and as scientists have commented on the compressed schedule between summer survey data availability and stock assessment results. **PNCIAC was strongly opposed to a later season start date.** They noted the season start date was pushed back previously from Sep to Oct 15 because the crab meat fill and prices are better then, there was less deadloss, and the product could still be delivered by the holiday season. The window to supply crab markets is already on a compressed time frame between Oct 15 to get crab shipped in Nov to meet holiday market demand, a traditional high-value market. The crab seasons have evolved over time to find the best balance for crab science, premier product with high meat fill, and the best time to supply key, traditional high-value markets. If anything needs to move, then the Council meeting date should move earlier to accommodate the Oct 15 season start.

PNCIAC may comment on this, as needed, as the Council considers process and meeting schedule changes.

8. Other Business

Discussion of Council comment deadlines.

Meeting adjourned 10:16am AKT