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OPINION: Safeguarding Alaska offshore habitat and providing a path forward for trawling

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As commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, I often hear concerns about the impacts of trawl gear used in Alaska's pollock fisheries, most recently related to potential unobserved mortality of crabs and halibut in the Bering Sea. We know that pelagic trawls fishing for Alaska pollock are often operated close to, or in contact with, the seafloor. What we do not know is the extent of this contact or the potential impacts to bottom dwelling species like crab and halibut and their habitat. These data gaps are concerning to Alaskans, and I want to highlight actions underway to understand and address the unintended consequences on seafloor ecosystems in areas that fishery managers and stakeholders have recognized as needing protection.

Alaska's marine fisheries are universally recognized as a shining example of both bounty and sustainability. About 60% of domestically caught U.S. seafood comes from Alaska. Science-based management by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, North Pacific Fishery Management Council, and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has proven to be the key to ensuring that Alaska's fisheries continue to support good jobs, vibrant fishing communities and a healthy food supply for generations to come. But fishery management must be adaptive to changing biological and economic conditions, and declines in crab, halibut and other important stocks in recent years have heightened concerns about the impacts of bottom trawling.

When considering trawl fisheries, it's important to distinguish between bottom trawls and pelagic trawls used in the pollock fishery. As the name implies, bottom trawls are specifically designed to catch fish at or near the seafloor. Pelagic trawls are designed to fish higher than bottom trawls and are typically used to target a single species. The best available information indicates that bottom trawls have a greater impact on seafloor habitat than pelagic trawls, and ADF&G, the Council and NMFS have closed large areas of the ocean off Alaska to bottom trawling to minimize these impacts. That said, some key species such as scallops can only be fished with bottom fishing gear.

Alaska fishermen and fishery managers justifiably tout our sustainable ecosystem-based approaches that have effectively guarded against overfishing and protected at-risk habitats. This is confirmed by a 2023 review of essential fish habitat for Alaska's fish and shellfish species, which determined that the negative effects of fishing on essential fish habitat are minimal and temporary. Nevertheless, more can be done to improve available information that will help us understand and address the effects of pelagic trawls on the seafloor. Collectively, we need to prioritize efforts to more precisely estimate the amount of seafloor contact and determine the potential consequences for sensitive habitats and benthic species like crabs and halibut. This doesn't mean pelagic trawls should never touch the bottom. But in areas identified as

needing protections, we must find ways to limit negative impacts. Sensitive areas with notable pelagic trawl fishing effort that are closed to bottom trawling include the Red King Crab Savings Area in the Bering Sea and king and tanner crab areas off Kodiak Island.

This past April, I met with a group of trawl industry representatives to discuss this topic and request their input on solutions. In my view, the best path forward is for the industry to lead the way in identifying verifiable techniques for using gear innovations to minimize bottom contact by pelagic trawls in sensitive areas. The fishing industry has the experience and knowledge to best adapt their gear to minimize impacts to the seafloor. Therefore, my goal is to work with the trawl industry and other affected fishery participants on a science-driven approach that can be used by the Council and NMFS to ensure regulations are enforceable and effectively manage the amount of bottom contact in areas where it is a concern. Gov. Mike Dunleavy's Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force shared support for this approach when it recommended industry and agency collaboration to develop gear modifications for improved bycatch management.

I am pleased to report that the trawl industry representatives accepted the challenge. They have committed to continue ongoing research to measure the extent of bottom contact by pelagic trawl gear, evaluate the impact of that contact and gear modifications to reduce it, and examine other potential solutions. The industry representatives agree this effort must produce solutions within a reasonable amount of time and are currently developing a timeline with deliverables to ensure steady progress. In part, the urgency is driven by the need to minimize crab mortality and increase successful recruitment to help bring the fisheries back. More broadly, this is about ensuring we manage Alaska's fisheries the right way: following the science, accounting for ecosystem effects and ensuring our management approaches are sustainable. Alaskans expect and deserve nothing less.

Doug Vincent-Lang is the Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game.