



C3 Pelagic Trawl Gear

June 2025 Council Meeting

Action Memo

- Council Staff: Anita Kroska (C3a, C3b), Taylor Holman (C3c)
- Other Presenters: C3a - Julie Bonney (Alaska Groundfish Databank), Susie Zagorski (United Catcher Boats), Austin Estabrooks and Caitlin Yeager (At-sea Processors' Association)
C3c - Caleb Taylor and Alicia Miller (NMFS SF)
- Action Required: C3a – Receive industry innovations update, action as necessary
C3b – Review pelagic trawl gear innovation discussion paper, action as necessary
C3c – Final action on pelagic trawl gear definition analysis
1. Review analysis, provide any input and recommendations
 2. Select preferred alternative for final action, or request additional analysis

BACKGROUND

Agenda item C3 includes several distinct items relating to pelagic trawl gear. These items are combined within a single agenda item so that the Council can review all pelagic trawl gear-related reports, analyses, and information prior to receiving public testimony and taking any actions as necessary at this meeting.

Note that the subitems will be presented in the order listed below, which differs from the alphabetic order listed on the eAgenda:

- 1) C3c – gear definition analysis
- 2) C3b – innovation discussion paper
- 3) C3a – industry update

Item C3c is the pelagic trawl gear definition analysis, which is scheduled for Council Final Action. This is a separate and focused regulatory action that is intended to clarify current regulations and allow enforcement officers to clearly and consistently identify legal and noncompliant pelagic trawl gear. **Item C3b** is the gear innovations discussion paper, focusing on ongoing efforts to encourage pelagic trawl gear innovation with the goal to minimize the impacts of pelagic trawl gear on bycatch, sensitive habitat, and unobserved mortality. **Item C3a** is an update on the specific research of the Gear Innovation Initiative and will be presented by the Pelagic Trawl Gear Industry Working Group. All the items are to some extent interrelated; for example, it is expected that updates to the gear definition may facilitate the process to incentivize trawl gear innovation. A more detailed description of each item is provided below.

C3c: Gear Definition Analysis – Initial Review/Final Action

The Council is considering taking final action to amend the regulatory definition of pelagic trawl gear. This action is intended to facilitate compliance and enforcement without requiring material changes to current gear configurations. Regulatory changes are necessary to update the pelagic trawl gear definition to allow the use of gear designs commonly used by fishery participants that meet conservation and management goals for pelagic trawl fisheries in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. A regulatory definition of pelagic trawl gear remains necessary as an enforcement tool to monitor vessel compliance with gear and area closures where use of nonpelagic trawl gear is prohibited.

The action alternative and options under consideration were selected by the Council at their October 2024 meeting, following the review of a preliminary EA/RIR document that analyzed potential revisions to the regulatory definition of pelagic trawl gear. At their October 2024 meeting, the Council responded to analyst requests for input on several questions and clarifications, and amended the action alternatives. The Council's [October 2024 motion](#) included the alternatives listed below. The options under the action alternative can be implemented in any combination. These options are intended to create a clear and enforceable definition of pelagic trawl gear that allows for identification of legal and noncompliant gear, and allows for the use of widely utilized gear designs that meet conservation and management goals.

Analysts are requesting Council input on several questions and clarifications about the alternatives and options, particularly Option 4 and Option 5. These are listed in the Executive Summary under “Summary of Items Highlighted for Council Input.” As explained in Section 6.2 of the analysis, there are a couple ways NMFS could implement the options under Alternative 2. Additional guidance and clarity from the Council on the points highlighted in the Executive Summary will aid NMFS in the proposed rule development process, should the Council choose to take final action. The Council may also choose to request additional review, or choose not to take any further action on this item.

Gear Definition Analysis Alternatives

Alternative 1: No Action.

Alternative 2: Revise the definition of pelagic trawl gear to:

- Option 1.** Specify that the limitations on flotation and metallic components are not applicable to the codend.
- Option 2.** Remove outdated text related to parallel line trawls.
- Option 3.** Allow the use of flotation aft of:
 - Suboption 1:** 5.5 inch stretched mesh, or
 - Suboption 2:** 15 inch stretched mesh.
- Option 4.** Allow instruments capable of observing, monitoring, or adjusting the fishing gear, catch, fishing activity, or fishing environment (including seafloor clearance) to be attached to pelagic trawl gear. Floats, capable of providing up to 100 lb (45.3 kg) of buoyancy, may be attached to or within 6 feet of each instrument.
- Option 5.** Allow the use of metallic components in the following locations:
 - Suboption 1:** Forward of the fishing circle.
 - Suboption 2:** Aft of the fishing circle and forward of: **a)** 5.5 inch stretched mesh, or **b)** 15 inch stretched mesh.
 - Suboption 3:** Aft of: **a)** 5.5 inch stretched mesh, or **b)** 15 inch stretched mesh.

C3b: Pelagic Trawl Gear Innovation Discussion Paper

In [February 2024](#), the Council tasked staff to prepare a discussion paper to inform options for incentivizing pelagic trawl gear innovation. This discussion paper analyzes available information and existing Council processes to inform options to encourage and/or incentivize innovation that meets Council objectives to minimize the impacts of pelagic trawl gear bycatch, sensitive seafloor habitat and unobserved mortality, and improve gear efficiency and effectiveness.

The discussion paper focuses on the Council's request to highlight current knowledge and collaborative work that could inform a process for incentivization, added regulatory flexibility, and pathways for enforcement, which may guide the Council in its intent to "review options for changes to the performance standard" following development of the discussion paper and the availability of research results. As such, this discussion paper does not focus on the trawl performance standard per se. The paper highlights current research innovations, limitations to innovation, regulatory processes for gear revision, and management tools. Since the pelagic trawl gear definitions apply to all federally managed areas in the GOA and BSAI, and NOAA OLE has requested consistency, the Council intends that potential future actions to allow for gear innovation would apply to all vessels using pelagic trawl gear.

At the June 2025 meeting, the Council will review the posted [discussion paper](#) and may choose to take further action on this issue. Further action on this issue could include a request for an expanded discussion paper with a specific list of requests. The Council could also establish a Purpose and Need statement for this action and a suite of alternatives for analysis, including analyses of innovation incentives and options for modifications to the current performance standard. The Council could also decline to take further action on this issue.

C3a: Innovations Development Update

In [February 2024](#), the Council placed a high priority on several ongoing research projects related to understanding the effects of the groundfish fishery on crab abundance and distribution. Among these, the Council discussed ongoing collaborative research between the pollock industry and the Fisheries, Aquatic Science, & Technology (FAST) Lab at Alaska Pacific University, and requested regular updates. The Pollock Gear Project and Gear Innovation Initiative work aims to address ongoing Council concerns regarding the potential impact of pelagic trawl gear on sensitive benthic habitat and unobserved mortality of stocks that rely on such habitat. To address these concerns, the project team is first developing a baseline understanding of the current impact of pelagic trawl gear, which involves improved information on gear configurations, how the gear is fished, and how much bottom contact varies by time and area. The research includes a) cataloging the gear and conducting fishing practices surveys, b) simulating the gear, and c) measuring bottom contact and clearance at sea. The project initially started with Bering Sea pollock CPs in 2022, and has since expanded to CPs and CVs in both the BSAI and GOA regions.

In October 2024, the Pelagic Trawl Gear Industry Working Group provided an overview and update to the Council on the Gear Innovation Initiative, which included pelagic trawl gear cataloging, gear simulations, and plans for field tests. At the June 2025 meeting, the Council will receive another presentation from this working group that will include an updated research plan and timeline, provide an overview of the participating vessels by each fleet (BSAI CP, BSAI CV, GOA CV), and detail the progress that has been made by each fleet thus far.