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NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Angel Drobica, Chair | Diana Evans, Executive Director
1007 W. 3rd Avenue, Suite 400, Anchorage, AK 99501
Phone 907-271-2809 | www.npfmc.org

D1 Pelagic Trawl Gear Research Updates

June 2026 Council Meeting

Action Memo

Council Staff: Dr. Kate Haapala

Other Presenters: Susie Zagorski (United Catcher Boats), Austin Estabrooks (At-sea Processors Association), Dr. Brad Harris (FAST Lab, Alaska Pacific University), Scott Goodman (Bering Sea Fisheries Research Foundation), Dr. Sean Hardison (University of Alaska Fairbanks), Shannon Carroll (Trident Seafoods), and Dr. Noëlle Yochum (Trident Seafoods)

Action Required: Receive updates on ongoing pelagic trawl gear and crab research, as well as the Bering Sea pollock industry's dynamic spatial closures for crab avoidance in the 2026 A season, and recommend future action if desired

BACKGROUND

Under the D1 item, the Council will receive previously requested updates from representatives of the Bering Sea pollock industry Incentive Plan Agreements (IPAs) on the industry's voluntary dynamic spatial closures for Bristol Bay red king crab avoidance in the 2026 A season, as well as updates on research aiming to better quantify and understand current bottom contact by pelagic trawl gear.

The Council also may evaluate potential management measures to further minimize the impacts of pelagic trawl gear in areas that are closed to nonpelagic trawl gear and address potential unobserved crab mortality, as stated in its [June 2025 motion](#)¹ for this issue. While the Council has thus far indicated its intent is to revise the performance standard for pelagic trawl gear² operations based on available information, the Council may also consider other management changes to achieve its objectives.

Staff have also posted the June 2025 Pelagic Trawl Gear Innovation Discussion Paper (item C3b in June 2025) under the D1 item for this meeting in its original form because it contains relevant information and so it is easily accessible. It has not been updated with new content nor will it be presented by Council staff.

History

The Council's interest in pelagic trawl gear research updates is to encourage modifications that can be expected to minimize bycatch, impacts to sensitive seafloor habitat and unobserved mortality,

¹ Note that the Council's [Pelagic Trawl Research webpage](#) has been created and regularly updated in response to the Council's request for staff to prepare a public document including the timelines and milestones for the Gear Innovation Initiative, existing or new EFPs on gear modifications, and any other new research to fill the data gaps for pelagic trawl gear identified by the Unobserved Fishing Mortality Working Group.

² The performance standards were established when pelagic trawl gear was defined in Federal regulation in 1993. The performance standards differ by region (Bering Sea/Aleutian Island and Gulf of Alaska) and are specified at 50 CFR 679.7(a)(14).

and improve gear efficiency and effectiveness. The substance of the D1 agenda item stems from the Council's broader consideration of potential conservation measures for Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC). When the Council decided not to pursue further analysis of potential closure areas for the Bering Sea/Aleutian Island groundfish fishery because the analysis demonstrated the proposed closures posed a negative impact on other prohibited species, it also stated its intention to use inseason information and results from several ongoing research projects (e.g., winter pot surveys, crab tagging studies, pelagic and pot gear research) to develop framework agreements/ crab avoidance measures ([February 2024 motion on C2](#)). These research projects are a high priority for the Council, and it has requested regular updates. In February 2024, the Council also tasked staff with preparing a discussion paper to inform options for incentivizing pelagic trawl gear innovation with reducing impacts to benthic habitat and unobserved mortality, maintaining fishing efficiency, and providing flexibility for continued gear innovation and emerging technologies.

The Council received the [discussion paper](#) tasked in February 2024 at its June 2025 meeting alongside two presentations covering research updates from the APU-Gear Innovation Initiative (GII), which aims to address ongoing concerns regarding seafloor contact and the need for higher resolution of spatiotemporal gear impacts data from the Fishing Effects model. Dr. Brad Harris (FAST Lab, APU) first presented an overview of the analytical/ academic components of the GII, followed by a presentation from the Pelagic Trawl Industry Working Group describing the gear configurations, vessel information, and fishing practices provided by industry participants to support ongoing analyses. Note that both presentations are available on the Council's [June 2025 e-Agenda](#) under the C3 item.

At its June 2025 meeting, after receiving the discussion paper on pelagic trawl gear innovation, the research updates, and substantial public testimony, the Council requested the Bering Sea pollock industry voluntarily develop dynamic spatial closures for the 2026 A season to protect BBRKC, as well as an update on these measures and research focused on improvements to pelagic trawl gear performance. The Council requested inseason performance and research updates be provided at a future meeting so the best scientific information available is available as the Council further considers its objectives for pelagic trawl gear performance.

Requested Updates and Presentations

This section of the memo provides a brief overview of the inseason performance and research updates that will be provided under D1 in response to the Council's June 2025 motion. The order of the content below aligns with the structure of the June 2025 motion and not necessarily the order of the presentations that will be provided in-meeting.

2026 Measures for Dynamic Spatial Closures

Representatives from the Bering Sea pollock industry IPAs (Ms. Susie Zagorski and Mr. Austin Estabrooks) will provide an overview of the industry's dynamic spatial closures for crab avoidance in the 2026 A season. The Council last received an update from IPA representatives on the industry's efforts to develop these voluntary avoidance measures at its [December 2025 meeting](#), at which point the Council requested information on the timing and duration of closures, Bristol Bay red king crab bycatch inside and outside the Red King Crab Savings Area (RKCSA), salmon bycatch rates relative to the closure trigger, salmon avoidance efforts and fleet behavior inside and outside the RKCSA, and methods used to monitor vessel activity.

Gear Innovation Research and Timelines

Dr. Brad Harris will provide an update from the APU-GII covering recent/ ongoing research to provide updated information on pelagic trawl gear dimensions and interactions with benthic habitat by

systematically documenting the design and configuration of every pelagic trawl used in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska and simulating the gear's performance. This update will cover progress on the gear catalog and CP field studies, anticipated project timelines, and any updates to the Fishing Effects model. The Council has previously stated that the updated bottom contact estimates from the Fishing Effects model and any related gear research will provide a baseline for the Council, should it consider revising the performance standards for pelagic trawl gear.

Other Research Updates

The Council will receive two additional research updates. First, Mr. Scott Goodman (Bering Sea Fisheries Research Foundation) and Dr. Sean Hardison (University of Alaska Fairbanks) will provide an update on directed crab industry research, including the collaborative pot sampling project and other research on fishery gear interactions with crab. The Council has requested this update to help inform its decision-making, while noting this information could be informative for the Bering Sea pollock industry and the dynamic spatial closures for crab avoidance. Second, the Principal Investigators, Mr. Shannon Carroll and Dr. Noëlle Yochum, will present an update on the [Trident Seafoods Exempted Fishing Permit](#) (EFP). This EFP is for a three-year project developing and testing modifications to the footrope of standard pelagic trawl gear used to harvest pollock in Alaska.

Next Steps

After receiving the scheduled updates and presentations and public comment, there are several next steps the Council could take. The Council could take no further action, request further information from staff in the form of another discussion paper, or initiate an analysis. If the Council initiates an analysis, it must identify a purpose and need statement and alternatives.