

Pacific Northwest Crab Industry Advisory Committee (PNCIAC)

Meeting Minutes and Recommendations

May 25, 2022 9-11am AKT

ATTENDEES

Committee Members: Steve Minor (Chair), Jamie Goen (Secretary, non-voting), Lance Farr, Erling (Jake) Jacobsen, Edward Poulsen, Mike Simpson, Sean Dwyer, Mark Casto

(Committee members not in attendance: Dean Fasnacht, Gary Painter, Brett Reasor, Elizabeth Reed)

Others in Attendance:

Council staff - Sarah Marrinan, Sarah Rheinsmith, Sam Cunningham, Diane Evans, Jon McCracken

NOAA Fisheries – Brian Garber-Yonts, Doug Duncan, Alicia Miller

BSFRF - Scott Goodman

Steve Ricci, Angel Drobnica, Heather Mann, Paul Matyas, Lenny Herzog, Doug Wells, Mateo Paz-Seldon, Gretar Gudmundsson, Heather McCarty, Ernie Weiss

AGENDA

1. Discuss Bristol Bay Red King Crab issues including voluntary measures
2. Snow crab rebuilding
3. Council process changes
4. Other business

MINUTES

Steve (chair) noted the crab industry is in crisis and that crab will be a feature of the next several Council meetings. PNCIAC should expect to meet several more times this year.

1. Discuss Bristol Bay Red King Crab issues including voluntary measures

Sam Cunningham gave an update on the April Council meeting Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC) discussion paper. Council asked for voluntary reports at the October meeting from industry sectors that encounter BBRKC. The voluntary industry reports should cover 2 things: (1) reports from crab and groundfish sectors on measures to reduce crab discard mortality (particularly non-regulatory measures that can be implemented more quickly), and (2) reports on research that would inform more flexible spatial management. For research, think medium to long-term research – particularly gear modifications or unobserved fishing mortality.

In addition to the regular Council verbal and written comment process for the October meeting, the Council will have a comment portal open specific to these industry reports with a deadline for submitting comments by September 23. This is a week ahead of the normal Council comment deadline, but after the discussion paper is published. Submitting a comment under this request for information doesn't preclude an individual or an organization from submitting comment for the October Council meeting. The awkwardness of having two different comment platforms was acknowledged, noting it was because of initial Paperwork Reduction Act concerns.

Voluntary measures by the directed crab fishery – Jamie Goen noted that crabbers have been working on this for some time and have met since the April Council meeting. Crabbers are looking at ways to decrease discard mortality through increased mesh size, longer soak time, and hot spot reporting. Other options require coordination with ADFG and processors, including retaining smaller than market size

males for *opilio* and *bairdi* (doesn't apply for BBRKC where legal size is retained) and being able to retain multiple crab species beyond existing allowances.

Dynamic closed areas – Council doesn't have a pre-defined idea of what "dynamic closed areas" are. It is something that is temporary or flexible. Asked what research is needed to refine closure areas in 512 or 508? Question on whether the Council is looking at static closed areas for crab? Could be but that would be a regulatory process. Looking for things to do in 2023 more quickly on a voluntary basis. Tagging studies ongoing that could inform changing areas on a seasonal basis. Dynamic closed areas could apply to any gear. Should pelagic trawl use elevated gear or other gear changes to reduce crab and bottom habitat impacts? Measures to reduce impacts on crab could involve gear changes. Council has open mind that information exists to change the way managing, let's consider. Think about what can be done in 2023 on voluntary basis versus longer-term.

Research that could inform development of spatial management measures – Scott Goodman noted that the status of the resource requires that sooner is better and more is better. We don't have all the information we want or need and that is a reality in crab even in good periods, and it's amplified right now with crab status. The Bering Sea Fisheries Research Foundation (BSFRF) is looking into movement with smart tags. This will help fill in gaps from surveys, fisheries data, bycatch. The focus is on BBRKC because it is more difficult to put these tags on snow crab which are smaller. However, some tags are being tested right now on snow crab. Proposed research to develop technology for smaller tags for snow crab. BSFRF research funds are shrinking because of stock status so prioritizing key research over the next year. Around 300 tags deployed on BBRKC. BBRKC male tags popped and information was available in the April discussion paper. Female tags have popped but the data is not yet available – expected soon. NMFS bottom trawl survey is gearing up now and will be through leg 1 (in BBRKC area) in about 3-4 weeks. The survey will be deploying more BBRKC tags. This won't give us perfect data and should not preclude taking actions immediately while we gather more data. We're in a dire situation and need to do something right away. Collaborative efforts are underway to fill data gaps, including Amendment 80 and BSFRF work toward a winter survey.

Question about any discussion on a survey using pots? Yes. Need to think of objectives and what trying to gather. Winter survey could benefit by also pairing with a pot survey. Could use NMFS trawl or BSFRF trawl (different gears) and because trawl used during a low abundance period, could be handcuffing our observations of presence/absence. Pot survey could help.

Important to look at temporary measures right now whether dynamic or static closed areas. Keep all things on the table.

Question on survey resampling protocols discussed at CPT and whether in place for this year's survey? Yes, likely. But need to be careful right now because small changes could have large consequences. If change threshold of resampling, then need to explain clearly because it changes the status and understanding of reproductive BBRKC females. It's likely leg 1 results will warrant a re-tow because of a cold winter/spring. Would change from 10% to 25% if non-impregnated females. Given uncertainty right now, need most information possible from this year's survey. Consequences of not doing a re-tow in a year we believe to be cold because we changed a threshold, that needs to be considered very carefully. 2020 to now, we've had 1 good survey. 2019 was an anomalous survey. From 2018 survey to now, we have some concern over continuity. Best scenario is for NMFS to do a full survey and not change anything, do corner stations, deeper stations and not change anything.

Comment that the Council is looking for feedback in October and PNCIAC should request that all sectors affecting BBRKC come to Council with meaningful solutions. The directed BBRKC fishery discards are too

high. Pot cod bycatch is too high. Amendment 80 should be doing what they can. Pollock pelagic trawl is on the bottom too much. Pollock could fish in the RKCSA as long as they're actually mid-water, not if they're on the bottom when crab are molting and mating. Each sector should come to October prepared with meaningful solutions or else expect the Council to take action.

PNCIAC draft a letter to the Council in June requesting that each sector (directed crab, pot cod, A80, pollock) that impacts BBRKC come to the Council in October with meaningful actions to reduce their impacts. If meaningful voluntary measures are not found, then the Council should consider specific action. MOTION PASSED unanimously

Comment that PNCIAC could go further than that and request RKCSA close to all trawling when molting and mating, like other countries that protect crab when they are in that state. Concern over softshell crab and no accounting for unobserved fishing mortality, especially for trawl. Comment that a RKCSA closure should apply to all gears. Comment from fisherman that used to fish pollock that trawling shouldn't be allowed in the RKCSA at any time because pollock pelagic trawl gear is collapsed hard on the bottom sometimes. A 20 fathom opening collapses down to 10 fathoms on the bottom. That was decades ago and not sure what the practices are now, but they are on the bottom.

PNCIAC recommends the RKCSA be closed to all trawling and pot gear when crab are molting and mating as a precautionary measure. MOTION PASSED unanimously (incorporate the context that this is a precautionary approach and more research could help us understand the level of concern of unobserved mortality on vulnerable mating and molting)

This motion addresses concern that voluntary action not enough given pollock nets are on the bottom. Comment that would like to see RKCSA closed but wants to give pollock a chance to voluntarily take action; don't want to be too prescriptive. Comment about concerns about trawl impacts on molting crab in general whether A80 or pelagic trawl (PTR) and impacts could be enough to reduce the chances of rebuilding. PNCIAC could, out of caution, request that crab be protected when they are molting. This is similar to Lance's motion but not overly prescriptive. Ok if trawlers fish in there as long as midwater and can prove not on bottom. Comment about using a provision like GOA that allows no more than 10% of the time on bottom but hard to enforce. Message about concerns about unknown impacts to BBRKC when molting with any gear. RKCSA important but other areas are too. At a minimum RKCSA should be closed.

Out of caution and anticipating another BBRKC directed fishery closure, PNCIAC urges the Council to prohibit PTR and pot cod from the RKCSA. We need to send a strong message on potential impacts. Comment about pot cod voluntary agreement last season to stay out of the RKCSA and will likely need again this upcoming year.

This would be a regulatory amendment and could use molting/mating information already available such as the Jan-Jun timeframe described in the FMP. Could recommend further research on molting/mating timing and areas to further refine information available.

Talk of getting pot cod to voluntarily stay out during fall B season, too. Not in motion.

The motion at one point had language in about using a precautionary approach until we "get more research." There was discussion that "get more research" is vague. Struck the language with the intent to include rationale that unobserved fishing mortality is a concern and to close the RKCSA as a precautionary approach until gather more research and can prove unobserved fishing mortality is not a concern.

PNCIAC recommends keeping the survey re-tow thresholds for BBRKC and the corner stations around the Pribilofs and St. Mathew Island which are important for all crab similar to past years because we need the maximum amount of information on crab stocks this year. MOTION PASSED unanimously

Comment that we don't want to lose data given the crab stock status.

2. Snow Crab Rebuilding

Jon McCracken provided an update noting the rebuilding analysis for June posted recently. In February, the Council only received an update on snow crab rebuilding because the stock assessment model was not ready. This version of the analysis for the June Council meeting updates the Feb document by providing a strawman range of alternatives building from the new stock assessment and by updating the unobserved fishing mortality section pulling from the April BBRKC discussion paper. The Council will select a range of alternatives in June, an initial review analysis in Oct, and final action in Dec.

The alternatives are similar to St. Mathew's blue king crab.

Alt 1 - No action (which is not allowed under Magnuson-Stevens Act)

Alt 2 – set target rebuilding time. SSC will review the rebuilding projections from the CPT. CPT recommended using GMACS which results in a T_{min} less than 10 years as representative of snow crab over the next 20 years. If SSC agrees, T_{max} would be 10 years. CPT provided 3 different views of the world that resulted in a T_{min} less than 10 years. Can allow fishing if does not exceed T_{max} of 10 years.

Option 1 – no directed fishing until stock is rebuilt

Option 2 – allow directed fishery

Some discretion to allow bycatch. CPT noted bycatch would not affect rebuilding time frame. A fishing mortality of zero (F=0) would result in some closures of groundfish and crab fisheries.

Comment that rebuilding plans must consider harvest strategy, bycatch control measures, and habitat protections. How will those be included into the strawman alternatives? Old rebuilding plans did consider those components in the past (e.g. snow crab 1999).

Some changes could be made to bycatch measures – PSC or boundaries of COBLZ - but these would require an amendment to the groundfish FMP and need to be implemented in regulations. Would need to weigh this against timing.

Question on whether anyone has thought about other rebuilding plan models around the country and how they might apply? In particular, under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, rebuilding plans must consider the needs of fishing communities. Are there models around the country for extending rebuilding time periods to consider the need of fishing communities? Council staff has not looked at that yet.

PNCIAC recommends the snow crab rebuilding plan consider removing the minimum PSC floor, reviewing the COBLZ boundary and counting PSC caught outside area, extending the time to rebuild past 10 years for the needs of fishing communities (especially St Paul), estimating the impacts of unobserved fishing mortality, and a goal of maintaining the directed commercial crab fishery while rebuilding. MOTION PASSED unanimously

Comments on the motion noted that COBLZ doesn't overlap with whole snow crab stock range and that bycatch of snow crab caught outside should count toward the PSC limits. For unobserved fishing

mortality, the pollock fishery interacts with snow crab especially during pollock A season early in the year which happens on top of molting and mating crab.

3. Council Process Changes

Sarah Rheinsmith presented an update on Council process changes. One of five items being considered is to reevaluate the timing of crab and groundfish harvest specifications. Discussion paper in Feb 2022 considered assessment cycle and delaying the crab season start later than Oct 15.

BBRKC is a holiday-oriented market. With the Oct 15 start of BBRKC, tough to get it harvested, processed, and to market in time for holidays. Pushing it any later would make that even harder.

Industry relies on having bairdi open then, too, as an option to fish right after BBRKC. Traditionally been able to fish bairdi right after BBRKC. Fits well in fishing plan and market is healthy. Works well to fish bairdi then for those that fish cod at start of year and then turn to snow crab. Not going to be catching much snow crab when bairdi fishing because the bairdi pot webbing is bigger. Snow crab can just walk out. Can't fish east of 163 for bairdi. But, if could keep bairdi when fishing BBRKC, could reduce discards.

If considering changing season start for some crab and not others, need to consider comments earlier about efforts to reduce discards by allowing retention of multiple crab species simultaneously.

**Reiterate previous PNCIAC comments to Council about concerns with timing and process changes.
MOTION PASSED unanimously**

CPT discussed shifting from Sep to Dec but industry can't wait until Dec to know the amounts of crab to catch. Advise Council that opilio season in Jan and information related to that fishery needed well before Dec. Need time for planning. Need information in Sep to get crews to St. Paul and boats to Dutch Harbor.

4. Other business

Steve Minor notified PNCIAC about the proposal to remove the facility use cap and about a meeting to discuss the regional delivery exemption framework agreement. This has not been scheduled yet. If you want to be on that list, please contact Steve.

The USCG Tender vessel and loadline meeting on May 26 was announced as a meeting of interest for harvesters and processors.

Jamie Goen gave a quick update on the comment period for the 2019/2020 bairdi fishery disaster spend plan. The state is accepting comments through June 15. See ADFG fishery disaster website for more details. Noting that this spend plan will likely set a precedent for sharing between harvesters, processors, communities, and research for the larger 2021/2022 BSAI crab fishery disaster that is currently in review with the Secretary of Commerce. And encouraging all of us to work together to come to general agreement on sharing ahead of this comment deadline to speed up the process of getting relief money issued.

Next Meeting: **September 21** (after CPT and before Oct Council comment deadline)

Meeting adjourned 11:11am AKT