

## Pacific Northwest Crab Industry Advisory Committee (PNCIAC)

### Meeting Minutes and Recommendations

3.15.2024 12-2 pm AKT

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#### ATTENDEES

*Committee Members: Sean Dwyer (Chair), Lance Farr (Vice Chair), Edward Poulsen, Elizabeth Reed, Steve Minor, Dean Fasnacht, Mark Casto, Jamie Goen (Secretary, non-voting)*

*(Committee members not in attendance: Brett Reasor, Mike Simpson, Gary Painter, Jake Jacobsen)*

Quorum = greater than or equal to 50% (>=6)

#### *Others in Attendance:*

Council staff - Sarah Marrinan, Sarah Rheinsmith

ADFG staff – Mark Stichert, Kendall Henry

NOAA Fisheries – Andrew Olson, Alicia Miller

Colby Boulton

Mateo Paz-Seldon

Tristan Mandeville

#### AGENDA

1. Consider Board of Fisheries proposals (e.g., smaller size limits for *opilio* & *bairdi*)
2. Other business

#### MINUTES

At the start of the meeting, once a quorum was established, Andrew Olson (NMFS) highlighted that Amendments 54/55 and the proposed rule for c-shares and facility use caps in the BSAI Crab Rationalization Program had published (Feb 27 & Mar 7) and were available for public comment through April 29th. Council took action in Dec 2023. This was a big push to get a rule out so quickly. The goal is to get this finalized before the end of the IFQ application period. PNCIAC thanked NMFS for their efforts to get this out in a timely fashion to reduce the impact on crab fishery stakeholders.

#### **1. Consider Board of Fisheries proposals (e.g., smaller size limits for *opilio* & *bairdi*)**

The group discussed PNCIAC's role with the Board of Fish (BOF) as an advisory committee, similar to how it is an advisory body to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. BOF considers statewide shellfish fishery issues every 3 years with the next one being in March of 2025 with proposals due April 10, 2024. PNCIAC representatives go to BOF meeting and testify on behalf of PNCIAC. PNCIAC has been consistently active in BOF. BOF relies on its committees. PNCIAC gets more time to comment as a committee and their comments carry weight.

Mark Stichert (ADFG) reviewed proposals that ADFG is planning to submit. ADFG has several housekeeping proposals, largely observer program related or things that no longer apply under crab rationalization. ADFG proposal to create an eastern boundary for the directed *bairdi* fishery at 163 degrees long (no eastern boundary currently). ADFG also plans a proposal to update the Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC) harvest strategy to modify existing thresholds and the harvest control rule. Expect the change to take the reactivity out of the harvest strategy and reflect more current stock status. ADFG will bring options to the Crab Plan Team (CPT) at their May meeting.

PNCIAC asked if ADFG plans any changes to size limits for bairdi and snow crab? ADFG said no and provided an overview of the three components of the state harvest strategy for those species – thresholds, harvest control rule, and max TAC (total allowable catch). ADFG commented that these stocks have a terminal molt where they stock growing, unlike king crabs. And that the size retained and the mature size are different. The big crab matter, with the larger males thought to have higher reproductive value. The max TAC protects against overharvesting only large males by limiting the amount of preferred sized males harvested. The max TAC is what a change in preferred size would affect.

If industry wants a smaller preferred size and harvest across more sizes, you would likely see higher TACs in some years and less discards with smaller sizes going in your tank. There is likely no conservation or management issues with harvesting smaller sizes and there may be some benefits, especially in the West for bairdi. Snow crab is different and lots more uncertainty given the recent stock collapse. Likely not the best time to liberalize the harvest strategy.

Changing the preferred size does not impact the harvest strategy thresholds. However, changing the preferred size matters most when there are a lot of small crab in the water. Not expected to affect snow crab management for some time because those crab are too small.

There was a question on whether there was ever a time when all of the eggs were not be fertilized (i.e., not enough males)? No, not in the Bering Sea. Clutch fullness has been better than in the Gulf of Alaska. Snow and bairdi crab can both take and hold sperm from multiple males for multiple clutches/years.

PNCIAC comment that it might make sense to add flexibility to the harvest strategy, especially for bairdi. Don't want to overharvest but also don't want to under harvest. If size at maturity is dropping, it might be helpful to have flexibility.

ADFG spoke to their hesitation, especially for snow crab. It could have doubled the TAC going to a smaller preferred size, doubling or tripling the exploitation rate on the stock. Don't want to increase exploitation until understand more about the stock. For example, need to understand what the best "currency" of maturity is. Snow crab will likely rebound but when and to what level is uncertain. So we need to be cautious.

Concern expressed that the market value of smaller crab is lower. So, does industry want more crab worth less money or less crab worth more money?

Comment that it's a little more nuanced – it's not like you don't fish these crab and they grow up and you get to catch them later. With terminal molt and decreasing size at maturity, you don't catch them and they just die. They may never reach market (preferred) size. Having crab to harvest and process is better than not. And if they're not getting to market size, then we need to adapt. There is a market for 3¾" snow crab.

ADFG noted the number of times the preferred size limited the TAC is pretty rare (i.e. max TAC kicked in). May only get "credit" for having a lower preferred size about a third of the time. Reminder that smaller crab can be retained now, regardless of preferred size, as long as above the legal size. It's just not credited in the TAC. So, we can test markets now when we land smaller crab.

In 2018/2019, one theory that maybe we should have taken more snow crab out of the water because of competition. On the other hand, may have ended up in even worse shape. Need to better understand how terminal molt relates to functional maturity. All mature animals are not created equally. Size matters. Are those crab better suited to translated into market value rather than reproductive value.

Putting more research effort into understanding relative contributions and reproductive value of different sizes of crab.

Comment that some 4-inch snow crab had stubby legs. It could have been malnutrition. Snow crab collapse is thought to be caused by two things 1) lack of sea ice, leading to no food supply and then 2) huge population. Instead of using energy to grow, they might have diverted energy to use it to reproduce and then die. Comes at a cost of meat fill and growth. We should expect more frequent warming events moving forward, around every decade.

In considering a smaller preferred size, it's a cost-benefit conversation. In the next 3 years for snow crab, smaller size limits probably wouldn't change the TAC. We have the luxury of time to better understand how this could work. For bairdi, it might be a different answer. It might be worthwhile considering a smaller preferred size.

ADFG willing to help write a proposal. Need to be clear on the objective (i.e., higher TAC, reducing discards, etc).

ADFG reminded the group about past examples where more flexibility was built into the harvest strategy for dark shell crab through a joint ADFG/industry effort. Also, in the last BOF cycle, ABSC had a proposal for smaller preferred size of snow crab that built flexibility into the harvest strategy and didn't specify a lower size limit, but they ended up withdrawing the proposal. There's some language to start with. ADFG requested that moving forward, should leave the preferred size in the definition and add language that provides some flexibility.

**MOTION (Edward/Lance): PNCIAC encourages consideration of added flexibility for both the opilio and bairdi preferred size limits, knowing that fishery research is ongoing, and harvesters and processors are continuing to deliberate on impacts. PASSED Unanimously**

This is not a BOF proposal but is intended to get people to engage and try to figure out if there is a path forward. It is intended for our respective organizations and crab industry stakeholders.

Comment that the processing sector needs to be more engaged in PNCIAC. Only 2 processor reps attended.

Next steps are to submit these meeting minutes by March 29 for the Council meeting. The BOF proposal deadline is April 10. ADFG will distribute proposals over the summer. Staff then develops comments/analysis. The deadline for public comments is 3 weeks ahead of the March 2025 meeting.

## **2. Other business**

Next meeting will focus on the program review and be held after May 20th, but before the June Council meeting comment deadline.

ADJOURN 2:04 pm AKT