

A standout year for local seafood

LAINE WELCH - FISHERIES REPORT (01/01/11)

KODIAK -- Alaska's seafood industry worked hard in 2010 to ramp up its message to policy makers, especially those from the Railbelt region who tend to overlook the industry's economic significance.

How important is the seafood industry to Alaska and the nation? At a glance:

- 62 percent of all U.S. seafood landings come from Alaska.
- 96 percent of all wild-caught salmon comes from Alaska.
- Seafood is by far Alaska's No. 1 export, valued at nearly \$2 billion (next in line: zinc and lead at \$785 million).
- Alaska ranks ninth in the world in terms of global seafood production.

The seafood industry is second only to Big Oil in revenues it generates to the state government's general fund each year. The industry provides more Alaska jobs than oil and gas, mining, tourism and timber combined.

Here are some fishing notables from 2010, in no particular order:

The University of Alaska created a center devoted entirely to ocean acidification studies. Meanwhile, acid levels in the Gulf of Alaska and the Chukchi and Bering seas continued to increase faster and more severely than previously thought.

Catch-share programs became the preferred tool for managing U.S. fisheries. Federal managers budgeted \$54 million as "incentive" for catch shares to catch on in fishing regions.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council approved sweeping changes to its fishery-observer program that will include all vessels longer than 40 feet.

Alaska's biggest fishery rebounded to accommodate a 2011 pollock catch of nearly 3 billion pounds, a 54 percent increase over the past two years -- but in line with the average catch for the past 30 years.

Kodiak and Sitka were the latest fishing towns to add some local catch to their school lunch menus, following Dillingham, Kenai, Fairbanks and Mat-Su.

Halibut prices seldom dipped below \$5 a pound, boosting the value of the fishery to \$193 million, an increase of \$61 million over 2009.

Halibut catches continued a downward trend, and managers plan to trim the harvest again in 2011. Halibut catches in Southeast Alaska have dropped by more than 60 percent over the past five years.

Alaska salmon fishermen were paid an average of 66 cents a pound this year, a 16 percent increase over 2009.

The 2010 catch of 169 million salmon was the 11th largest on record. The dockside value of almost \$534 million was an increase of nearly 30 percent and the best showing in 18 years.

Two areas, Bristol Bay and Prince William Sound, accounted for 55 percent of the value of the total Alaska commercial salmon catch.

Prince William Sound set a record with a total catch of 75.4 million -- nearly 45 percent of all salmon harvested in Alaska this year. The PWS harvest of 69 million humpies accounted for 66 percent of Alaska's total pink salmon catch.

Norton Sound fishermen saw some of the best chum salmon runs in 25 years. At Kotzebue, the chum catches tracked the best in 15 years. Upper Cook Inlet fishermen hauled in a huge 2.7 million sockeye harvest, almost a million more fish than expected. King salmon continued to decline on the Yukon River.

A surprise pink salmon fishery at Bristol Bay (Nushagak) attracted 60 boats and 35 setnetters who pulled in more than 1 million humpies plus 60,000 cohos. It's been so long since a pink and coho salmon fishery occurred, managers had no numbers to compare the catches to.

Peter Pan Seafoods and Bristol Bay fishermen were recognized by Alaska Head Start Association for providing local salmon to children and elders throughout Southwest Alaska.

After a decade of debate, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration proposed regulations to allow genetically modified animals for human consumption. First up: a salmon that grows up to 30 times faster than normal. Alaska senators said they will try to stop the fish from ever getting to market.

It turns out that the deadliest catch is the safest catch. A federal report showed that salmon fishing is Alaska's most dangerous fishery, with 39 fatalities over the past decade. That compares with a death toll of 12 Bering Sea crabbers during the same time.

For the 21st year in a row, Dutch Harbor ranked as the nation's No. 1 port for seafood landings. Kodiak ranked No. 4, up from the No. 5 spot. Eleven Alaska fishing towns made the list of top 50 U.S. ports.

Americans ate slightly less seafood --15.8 pounds per person, the lowest level since 2002. Beef is still what's for dinner: 108 pounds per capita, followed by 73 pounds of poultry.

Alaska king crab fetched some of the highest prices ever. Bering Sea crabbers got an advance of \$6.25 a pound, compared with \$4.76 last year.

Higher fish prices drove up both the demand and value for fishing permits and IFQs/catch shares in most regions of the state.

Laine Welch is a Kodiak-based fisheries journalist. Her Fish Radio programs can be heard on stations around the state. Her information column appears every other Sunday. This material is protected by copyright. For information on reprinting or placing on your website or newsletter, contact msfish@alaska.com.