

Stakeholders ponder protections under Gulf rationalization

By Molly Dischner, Alaska Journal of Commerce

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King Cove Mayor Henry Mack overlooks the empty King Cove boat harbor just days before the crab season was set to begin in October 2005. Before the fleet was severely consolidated under crab rationalization, 75 to 80 boats arrived at the harbor to pick up crab pots, fuel up, buy groceries and get their tanks checked before the crab season began. More than 1,000 crew jobs were eliminated in the crab fishery under rationalization, with severe impacts on King Cove and Kodiak. Preventing such effects is a now major focus for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council as it prepares to rationalize the Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries.



SEATTLE — Fisheries stakeholders gathered Feb. 10 to talk about community protections in the pending Gulf of Alaska rationalization program.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council has asked for a discussion paper on how to provide bycatch management tools for the Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries, in particular through a rationalization program that ends the race for fish by allocating harvest privileges among user groups.

In October, the council asked staff to analyze a general structure for rationalizing Gulf of Alaska trawl fisheries as a means to minimize bycatch.

A program could allocate pollock and Pacific cod to cooperatives in the western Gulf, central Gulf and west Yakutat based on members' catch history. The prohibited species catch, or PSC, of species such as chinook salmon and halibut would be apportioned out to cooperatives on a pro rata basis.

Fishery participants could also have the option of operating in a limited access pool. A portion of the target species allocation could be based on performance standards that emphasize low bycatch rates.

The council's October motion also asked for analysis of regional delivery requirements, inclusion of processors and communities into the cooperatives and certain cooperative requirements addressing active participation, bycatch management and other issues.

Caps on the allowable levels of king salmon and halibut bycatch have already been set, and the trawl fleet has asked for the action to help them meet those caps.

Some past rationalization programs, however, have had unanticipated consequences for fishery participants and communities, particularly through consolidation of effort that has led to job losses.

When the Bering Sea crab fisheries were rationalized in 2005, some 1,000 jobs were eliminated in the first season when the fleet consolidated its effort to about one-third of the boats that had operated under open access.

Community entities have asked for certain protections, concerned that the rationalization program could lead to increased consolidation and will raise the cost of entry, limiting the number of participants who can invest in the fishery.

At the workshop, the council heard from those who have implemented community-fishing programs in a response to rationalization in an effort to see how inclusion of communities in cooperatives, or in the program via another mechanism, might play out.

The workshop was held in a panel format with representatives from East and West Coast community fishing organizations sharing their stories, as well as council members and analysts involved in the relevant rationalization programs.

The West Coast representatives were involved in a Morro Bay program in Northern California, while the East Coast individuals were from the Cape Cod area.

In Morro Bay, the city worked with other community groups to acquire quota share and vessel permits for the West Coast Groundfish Fishery's trawl sector. Those are used by local fishermen, and have helped maintain a fishing industry in the community. After rationalization, fishing activity out of that port declined to the point where the only remaining processor considered leaving and other support businesses also faced the possibility of shutting down.

A similar program is now being developed for Monterey Bay, according to David Crabbe, who talked about the West Coast program.

The Cape Cod Fisheries Trust also provides access to quota to local fishermen participating in Northeast groundfish and scallop fisheries. Generally, the goal is to see help them enter the fishery, or continue fishing, until they are able to buy their own quota. Much of that quota has been purchased from retiring fishermen, and is then leased out with certain requirements for residency and other qualifications.

In both regions, the community quota entities developed after the rationalization programs.

That detail stuck out to council member John Henderschedt, who represents the state of Washington on the council, who said he thought it provided food for thought.

"I was taken by how bottom up both of the models that we heard about were," Henderschedt said.

Ernie Weiss, from the Aleutians East Borough, noted that the North Pacific council has the opportunity to craft such programs from the beginning.

"We have the possibility to get out in front of it," he said. "Even a small initial allocation could help a community leverage more."

Nicole Kimball, who serves as the alternate to Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Cora Campbell on the North Pacific council, wrote in an email that the programs showed how a community can develop a way for both long-term fishermen and new entrants to participate in a fishery.

"I don't think they gave themselves enough credit for the community leadership necessary to make these programs successful," Kimball wrote. "And what came out loud and clear was the need for regional councils to make the hard decisions upfront, both allocation decisions and other provisions that can avoid excessive consolidation and either facilitate or promote the continued direct and indirect participation of the coastal communities that are dependent upon the fisheries you are proposing to change."

The workshop also drew additional members of the public to the council meeting.

Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, D-Sitka, came down from Juneau for the discussion.

Kreiss-Tomkins said he's had a few conversations with other legislators about the council's pending Gulf of Alaska action, and that there's increasing interest from lawmakers in making sure that Alaska fisheries benefit people in Alaska communities. That, he said, is hopefully a "healthy development" in the rationalization conversation.

Kreiss-Tomkins said he had the chance to talk to the Cape Cod representatives, and was impressed with their ability to self-govern and deal with management politics.

Council members have expressed concerns about creating a mechanism that required constant council oversight.

In the case of the Cape Cod program, much of the management has been done by the fishery participants, and Henderschedt said he was interested by the collaborative relationship between managers and the communities.

The council is expected to take the bycatch management package up again in April, and Weiss of the Aleutians East Borough said it's now up to communities to come up with some possible ideas for community fishing associations. How to make one or multiple entities that reflect the diversity of needs and communities throughout the Gulf will be the challenge, he said.

"That's an unanswered question," he said.

Molly Dischner can be reached at molly.dischner@alaskjournal.com.