

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Senate Resources Committee

Sponsor Statement for Senate Bill 54 By Request of the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission

Senate Bill 54 will extend for ten years the “sunset” date for Alaska’s vessel-based limited entry fisheries for weathervane scallops and Bering Sea hair crab. Limited entry into the vast majority of Alaska’s commercial fisheries has been implemented with a skipper-based system that awards permits to individual fishermen based on their prior history of participation in and economic dependence on each specific fishery. Vessel-based limited entry is a very narrow exception to the individual-based system, created by the Alaska State Legislature ten years ago.

In 2002 the Legislature amended the Limited Entry Act to allow vessel-based limited entry permits to be given to vessels with a history of fishing for weathervane scallops and Bering Sea hair crab in State waters. Because of concerns that innovation could have a “slippery slope” effect, and lead to vessel-based limited entry in other fisheries, the Legislature put a five-year limit on the new vessel-based limited entry system. When the five-year time limit was about to be reached in 2008, the Legislature extended the program for a further five years. Without the passage of SB 54, vessel-based limited entry for weathervane scallops and Bering Sea hair crab will automatically be stricken from the statute books on the 30th of December 2013.

The past ten years have shown that vessel-based limited entry is working well, with a small but efficient fleet of Alaskan vessels successfully harvesting weathervane scallops in State waters in addition to their fishing activity in federal waters. While conservation concerns have not allowed for any commercial openings of the Bering Sea hair crab fishery in the past decade, these permits are still held by vessels that are ready and able to harvest hair crab if and when fisheries managers decide that circumstances permit this fishery to open.

While opponents of vessel-based limited entry have predicted dire consequences if vessel-based limited entry were allowed to become law, none of these negative predictions has come true. Extending the sunset date for vessel-based limited entry within the Limited Entry Act is good policy, as it will allow the weathervane scallop fishery to continue operating as it has and will allow for a potential future opening of the hair crab fishery.