

Dec 13, 2012 - 02:43 PM AKST

Bycatch reductions for chinooks, chums keep moving

MOLLY DISCHNER, ALASKA JOURNAL OF COMMERCE

Chinook and chum could receive a little extra protection in federal waters when work continues on salmon bycatch efforts.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council agreed Dec. 9 that it is time for public review of a chinook measure for the non-pollock trawl fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska. That came after the council asked the Bering Sea pollock fleet to look at ways it could reduce its catch of western Alaska chum salmon. Any action for the Bering Sea is likely farther down the road.

The council passed a cap of 25,000 chinooks for the Gulf of Alaska pollock fleet that took effect in 2012. The pollock fleet uses pelagic, or midwater, gear. The new measure for the Gulf will affect non-pelagic, or bottom trawl, gear for the flatfish and cod fleets.

Council member Cora Campbell, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game commissioner, motioned to move ahead with public review of the potential chinook protections, with some options added to the alternatives staff had already presented.

Campbell's motion included additions to the analysis that the Advisory Panel, or AP, and Scientific and Statistical Committee, or SSC, had recommended. The SSC had also recommended releasing it for public review once the additions were made. The AP, however, had recommended not yet releasing the measure for public review.

The alternatives now up for analysis include hard caps with a variety of options. Those include apportioning a cap between the western and central Gulf of Alaska fisheries, apportion the limit by type of vessel, allowing only part of the limit to be taken early in the season and having a separate limit for the rockfish program. Several suboptions will also be considered, including apportioning the limit based on either historic chinook catch or historic total catch, and various specifications for a limit in the rockfish program.

Campbell said she realized that hard caps are far from an ideal way to control prohibited species catch, but that those tools are farther down the road, and it isn't responsible to have fisheries with unlimited potential for chinook mortality.

"We have stocks of salmon that are highly valued by fishing communities, we have fisheries that have a potential for unlimited mortality on stocks at a time when there's great uncertainty about the ability of those stocks to support high levels of mortality, and we have a requirement under the natural standards to minimize bycatch to the extent practicable and also to minimize the adverse affects in our action on fishing communities," Campbell said.

Council member Duncan Fields offered the amendment, which the council approved, to add the suboption to look at apportioning based on historical harvest in addition to looking at apportioning based on historic prohibited species catch.

During discussion, council member John Henderschedt questioned the method of dividing a prohibited species cap amongst sectors, rather than calculating everyone's needs and adding them together.

"Trying to use division to do this is just, is not the best way to be doing this," Henderschedt said.

Council chair Eric Olson disagreed.

"Well, if there was enough fish to provide for the sum of all the needs there would be no problem here," Olson said. "The problem is we don't have enough fish. And so now we have to find a way to use division to get there."

Glenn Merrill, sitting in for National Marine Fisheries Service Alaska Region Administrator Jim Balsiger, said the agency is always supportive of reducing bycatch, but would need to find ways to address enforcement and management issues before they can support final action on the alternatives.

The council is also working on a way to provide more bycatch tools in the Gulf through rationalization, or allocating fishing privileges to eliminate the race for fish, but such a package is far from being ready for action.

The council heard significant public testimony on the action, including those who wanted the smallest cap the council is considering, and those who don't think the plan is ready to move forward.

John Gauvin said he thought divvying up the prohibited species cap could make compliance more difficult, but that those participating in the fishery want to limit their take of those fish.

“I think the fleets do want to do better,” Gauvin said.

Julie Bonney from the Alaska Groundfish Data Bank said that organization did not support moving forward immediately, and wanted to see the trawl fleet gain tools to comply with bycatch before moving on with caps. She also said stock identification information was needed to better understand what is being caught and the impact the fleet has on the fishery. Those things would help them support an effort, she said.

“This isn’t the action to get us there,” she said.

Homer fishermen Pete Wedin said that while there are many unknowns about what’s happening to salmon, wasting chinook is definitely an issue.

“Many small boat fishermen throw up their hands and say that the corporations that exploit these large fisheries are too big to fight, too big to fail. In the case of chinook salmon in the Gulf of Alaska, these iconic fish are in short supply.”

For Bering Sea chum bycatch reduction, the council opted to ask industry for a plan outlining how they could work within the existing chinook incentive plan agreements, or IPA, rather than continue work on the current options. IPAs took effect in 2011 for the Bering Sea pollock fisheries and allow a larger share of the chinook salmon cap in exchange for vessels taking additional steps to minimize bycatch.

The council discussed the difficulties of balancing chinook and chum protections for western Alaska extensively, and also heard from staff that the alternatives they had in front of them might not make a sizable difference in chum escapement.

Quantifying the impact of chum bycatch on area fisheries is difficult, in part, because genetic identification work so far hasn’t been able to separate out various river systems within western Alaska.

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

*This article appears in the **December Issue 3 2012** issue of Alaska Journal of Commerce*

Read more: <http://www.alaskajournal.com/Alaska-Journal-of-Commerce/December-Issue-3-2012/Bycatch-reductions-for-chinooks-chums-keep-moving/#ixzz2KjptwRhR>