

"Reducing bycatch is key part of broader fisheries management picture"

A recent editorial in the Alaska Dispatch News (*Canada's trawlers drastically cut bycatch, why can't Alaska's?*) lauds the bycatch reduction successes of the Canadian trawl fishery and asserts that the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, the entity responsible for managing fisheries in federal waters off Alaska, is unable or unwilling to address the issue.

This commentary ignores the efforts the Council has put into measures to control and reduce bycatch in fisheries off the coast of Alaska, as well as a major initiative currently underway to restructure trawl fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska to provide those fisheries with the tools to fish more cleanly and efficiently.

In the past several years, the Council has focused the bulk of its attention on bycatch reduction, while still maintaining commercial fisheries that account for over half of the Nation's seafood production and are critically important to Alaska's coastal economies. For example, in 2011, the federal pollock fishery in the Bering Sea was managed for the first time under a hard cap on Chinook salmon bycatch. Since the complex system of caps and bycatch avoidance incentives has been in place, average annual Chinook salmon bycatch in this fishery has been 60% lower than the 10-year average, and 86% lower than the high of 122,000 Chinook salmon taken in 2007. Just this June, the Council evaluated the issue again in light of declining salmon abundance in western Alaska and initiated an analysis proposing further reductions in Chinook salmon bycatch as well as protections for chum salmon.

The Council also acted in 2011 to cap Chinook salmon bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska pollock trawl fishery, and in 2013, to cap all other trawl fisheries in the Gulf. These hard caps are the first of their kind to protect Chinook salmon caught incidentally in these fisheries.

In 2012, the Council acted to reduce the amount of halibut that could be taken as bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska trawl and longline fisheries to provide additional halibut for directed fisheries and for conservation purposes. And at its most recent meeting in June, the Council initiated an analysis of alternatives to reduce halibut bycatch caps in the Bering Sea for all gear groups. This analytical package will evaluate a potential halibut bycatch cap reduction from 10% to as much as 35%.

At the time the Council took action to reduce Gulf of Alaska halibut bycatch caps, it committed to continue addressing bycatch issues in the Gulf. The Council has launched a process to convert management of trawl fisheries from a competitive race for fish into a cooperative structure where vessels have the ability to fish slowly, strategically, and cooperatively. This type of management system allows vessels to share information about bycatch hotspots and incentivizes gear modifications and behavior to avoid bycatch. The preliminary design includes a minimum of 100% observer coverage on all trawl vessels. The management program under consideration may result in increased retention, use, and better quality of the fish vessels are targeting, and could provide an opportunity for a significant reduction in the catch of non-targeted species.

Several other jurisdictions have created similar management structures to the one the Council is considering. In the trawl fishery off the Pacific coast, discards have been reduced more than 50% by converting to a cooperative management structure. In Canada, the trawl fishery was able to achieve such bycatch success because it changed its management from a race for fish to a system in which each boat is responsible and accountable for a defined share of the total catch. Some of Alaska's fisheries already operate under a cooperative model. The Central Gulf of Alaska rockfish trawl fishery converted

to cooperative management in 2007, and since that time has seen more than a 70% reduction in halibut bycatch.

However, when considering converting to a cooperative program, all who rely on the resource must be considered. This issue will continue to be vetted and discussed by fishermen, processors, communities, and other stakeholders, and is guided by a purpose and need statement and set of objectives that the Council approved early in the process. This deliberative, iterative process incorporating significant stakeholder input has resulted in a preliminary program design that the Council is scheduled to review when it next meets in October.

And lastly, as I depart the North Pacific Fishery Management Council after my tenure of nine years, I can say that this Council takes its mandate to reduce bycatch to the extent practicable very seriously. The Council is also subject to a number of other mandates under the Magnuson Stevens Act, including the ten "National Standards." It is important for the public to understand that the Council is required to evaluate the effects of its potential actions more broadly than on a single resource user.

I strongly encourage all stakeholders who have an interest in these issues to engage in the Council process. The Council holds five public meetings a year, and input from the public who rely on the resources the Council manages is critical to good decision making. For more information on recent bycatch reduction measures and upcoming meetings, please visit the Council's website at www.npfmc.org.

Eric Olson is a native of Dillingham, has fished salmon commercially and for subsistence use, and served as the North Pacific Fishery Management Council Chairman for the last 7 years.