

BERING SEA HABITAT CONSERVATION

Alternatives for the Public review draft on Bering Sea Habitat Conservation updated April 3, 2007.

Problem Statement: The Council intends to evaluate potential new fishery management measures to protect Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) in the Bering Sea. The analysis will tier off of the 2005 EFH Environmental Impact Statement and will consider as alternatives open and closed areas and gear modifications. The purpose of the analysis is to consider practicable and precautionary management measures to reduce potential adverse effects of fishing on EFH and to support the continued productivity of Council managed species. EFH closures for habitat delineation will be done in consideration of local community use.

This EA/RIR/IRFA evaluates the impacts of two primary alternatives to the status quo, along with several minor components which are considered as options to the alternatives. These options can be chosen in any combination with any of the alternatives, and multiple alternatives can be chosen. The alternatives and options are as follows:

Alternative 1: Status quo. No additional measures would be taken to conserve benthic habitat.

Alternative 2: Open area approach. This alternative would prohibit non-pelagic trawling outside of a designated 'open area'. Non-pelagic trawling would be prohibited in the northernmost shelf area and the deepwater basin area of the Bering Sea. There is only one open area analyzed, which is based on the EFH EIS area, modified using non-pelagic trawl effort distribution data through 2005.

Suboption: A new open area approach is added that defines the northern boundary. The wedge, as described by the attached map, would move a portion of the northern boundary northward between Nunivak and St. Matthew Islands to 61° N.

Alternative 3: Gear modifications. This alternative would require gear modifications for all non-pelagic trawl gear used in flatfish target fisheries. Specifically, this alternative would require discs on non-pelagic trawl sweeps to reduce seafloor contact and/or increase clearance between the sweep and substrate. A performance standard of at least 2.5 inches elevation of the sweep from the bottom would be required.

The options below could be selected in combination with any Alternative; more than one option can be chosen.

Option 1. Close the area around Saint Matthew to non-pelagic trawling. This area would be configured such that the area near St. Matthew Island is closed to conserve blue king crab habitat

Option 2. Close an area to non-pelagic trawling around Nunivak Island with the southern border extending along the nearshore portion of Etolin Strait. This area would be configured such that the area around Nunivak Island and Etolin Strait is closed to conserve nearshore habitats, and minimize potential interactions with community use and subsistence fisheries taking place in the nearshore areas.

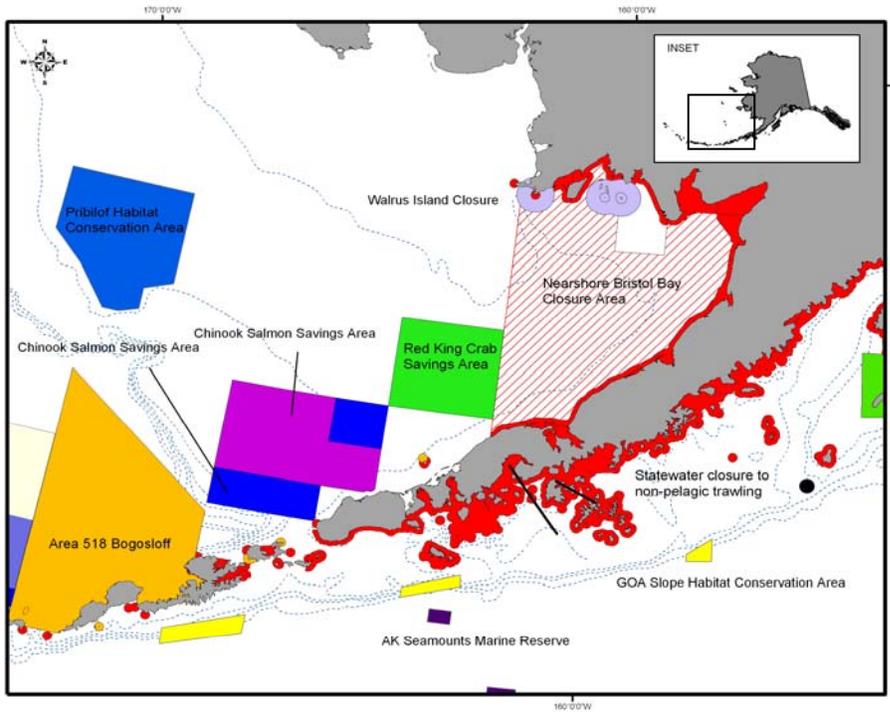
Option 3. Close an area to non-pelagic trawling around Nunivak Island with the southern border extending along the nearshore portion of Etolin Strait and Kuskokwim Bay. This area would be configured such that the area in southern Etolin Strait and Kuskokwim Bay is closed to conserve nearshore habitat and minimize potential interactions with community use and subsistence

fisheries taking place in the nearshore areas. The boundaries of this closure area are the result of negotiations by representatives of the flatfish industry and coastal communities.

Option 4: Close an area to non-pelagic trawling from the northern boundary line of the open area under Alternative 2, stretching from the Russian border around the southern end of St. Matthew Island to and around the southern portion of Nunivak Island and across Kuskokwim Bay to Cape Newenham and designate it as the Northern Bering Sea Experimental Fishing Area. The Council requests the NOAA/NMFS Alaska Fisheries Science Center design an adaptive management experiment in the closed northern area described under this option to study the effects of non-pelagic trawling in previously untrawled areas. The study should include open and closed areas and appropriate monitoring to study fishing impacts on benthic communities and ecological process, particularly as this relates to juvenile snow crab. The adaptive management experiment design will include review by the SSC. NMFS will provide the draft adaptive management experiment design to the Council for review within 18 months following the Federal Register publication of the final rule for this action.

Suboption: A new closure is added that defines the northern boundary. The wedge, as described by the attached map, would move a portion of the northern boundary northward between Nunivak and St. Matthew Islands to 61° N.

Option 5: Close the area to non-pelagic trawling around St. Lawrence Island. This area would be configured such that the area around St. Lawrence Island is closed to non-pelagic gear to conserve blue king crab habitat and minimize potential interactions with community use and subsistence fisheries taking place in nearshore areas.



ES 1. Fishery Closures to certain non-pelagic trawl fisheries thru 2006, these closures represent the current status of fishing available to non-pelagic trawl gear under the Status quo. Further information on fishery closures is provided in 50CFR 679.22.



Figure ES- 2 Alternative 2. Open Area Approach for Bering Sea. This alternative would prohibit non-pelagic trawling outside of a designated ‘open area’. Non-pelagic trawling would be prohibited in the northernmost shelf area and the deepwater basin area of the Bering Sea.



ES 3 Alternative 2 suboption1. Open Area Approach for Bering Sea. The suboption would move a portion of the northern boundary northward between Nunivak and St. Matthew Islands to 61° N This alternative would prohibit non-pelagic trawling outside of a designated ‘open area’. Non-pelagic trawling would be prohibited in the northernmost shelf area and the deepwater basin area of the Bering Sea

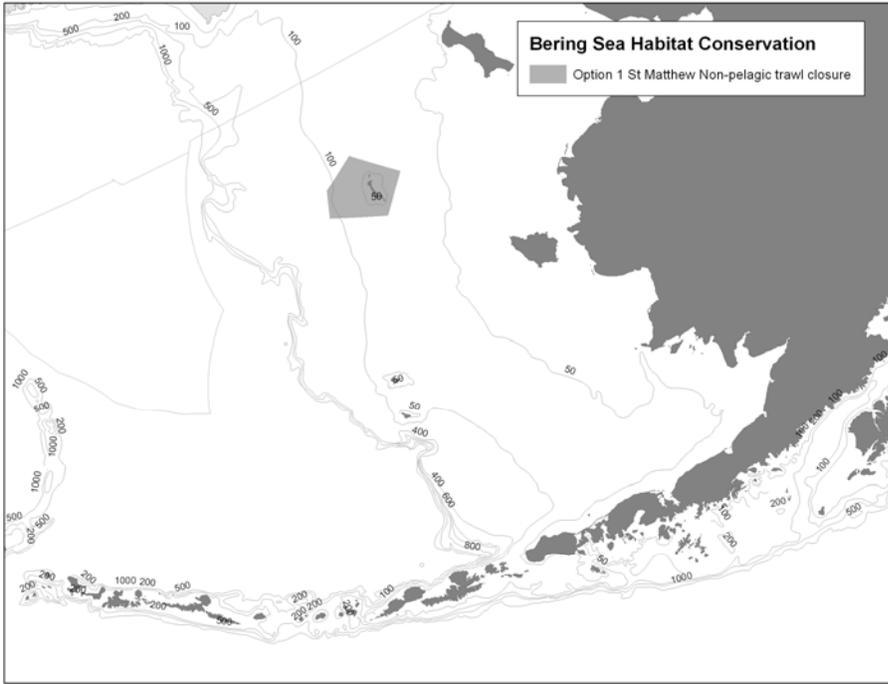


Figure ES- 4 Option 1. Close the area around Saint Matthew to non-pelagic trawling to conserve blue king crab habitat.

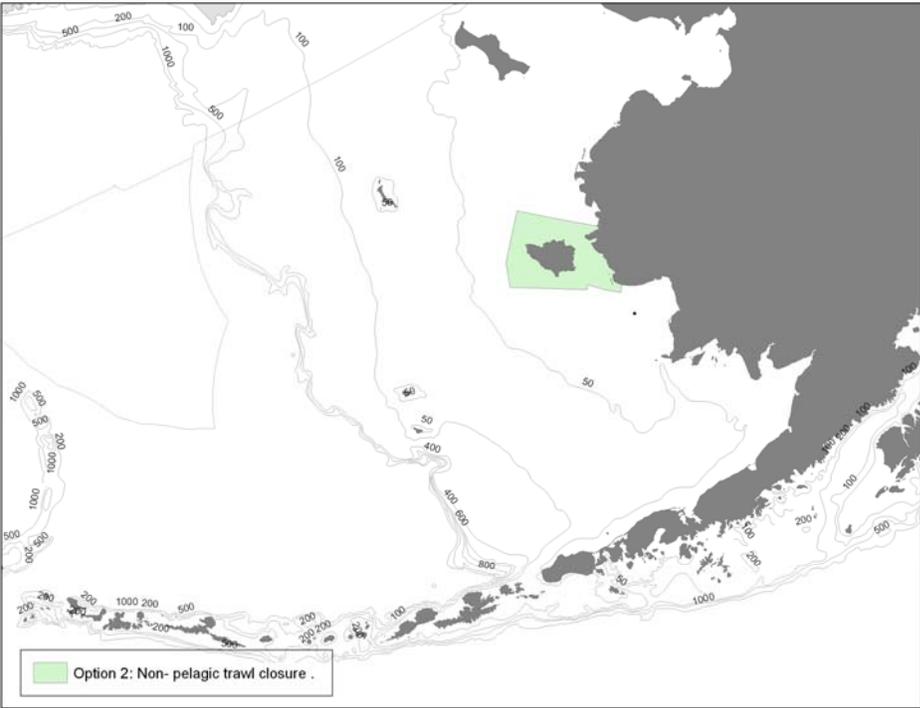


Figure ES- 5 Option 2. Close an area to non-pelagic trawling around Nunivak Island with the southern border extending along the nearshore portion of Etolin Strait.

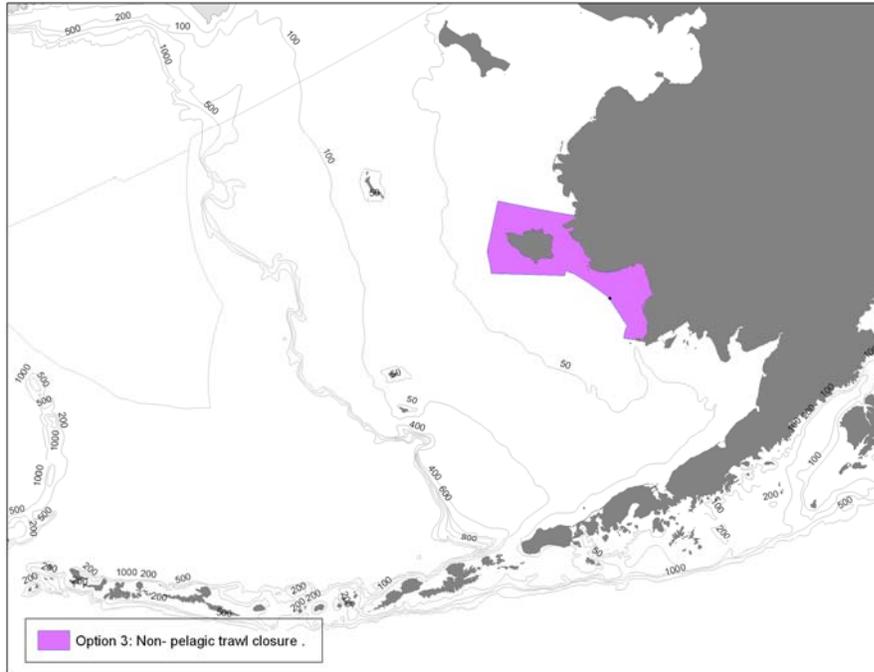


Figure ES- 6 Option 3. Close an area to non-pelagic trawling around Nunivak Island with the southern border extending along the nearshore portion of Etolin Strait and Kuskokwim Bay to conserve nearshore habitat and minimize potential interactions with community use and subsistence fisheries taking place in the nearshore areas.

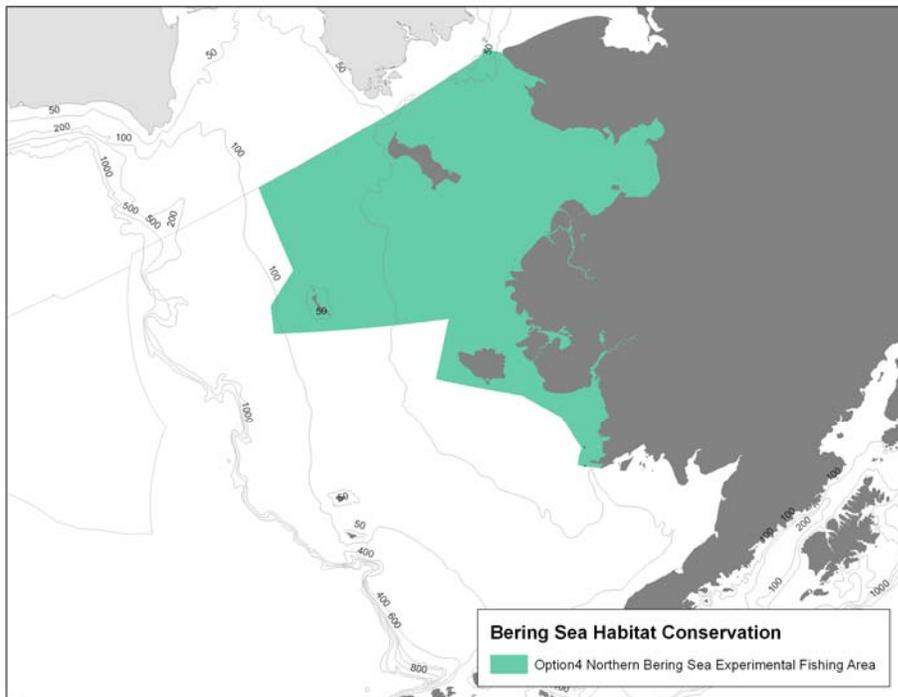
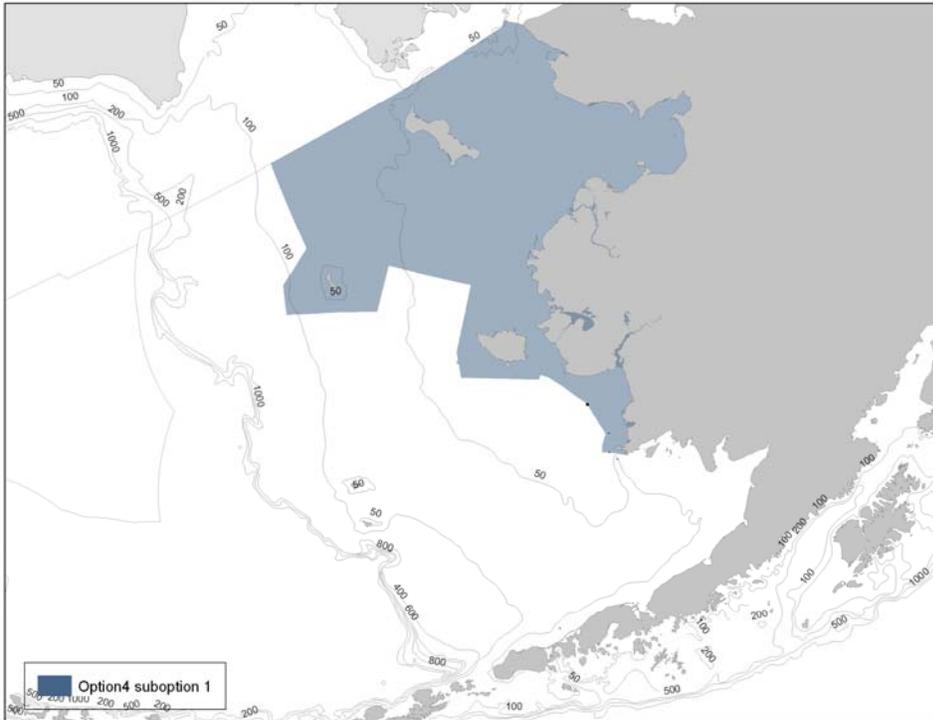


Figure ES- 7 Option 4. The Northern Bering Sea Research area would be closed to fishing with non-pelagic trawl gear. A scientific research plan will be developed for Council review within 18 months and implemented within 3 years of final action of this item.



ES 8. Option 4 suboption. The Northern Bering Sea experimental fishing area would be closed to fishing with non-pelagic trawl gear. The suboption would move a portion of the northern boundary northward between Nunivak and St. Matthew Islands to 61° N. A scientific research plan will be developed for Council review within 18 months and implemented within 3 years of final action of this item.

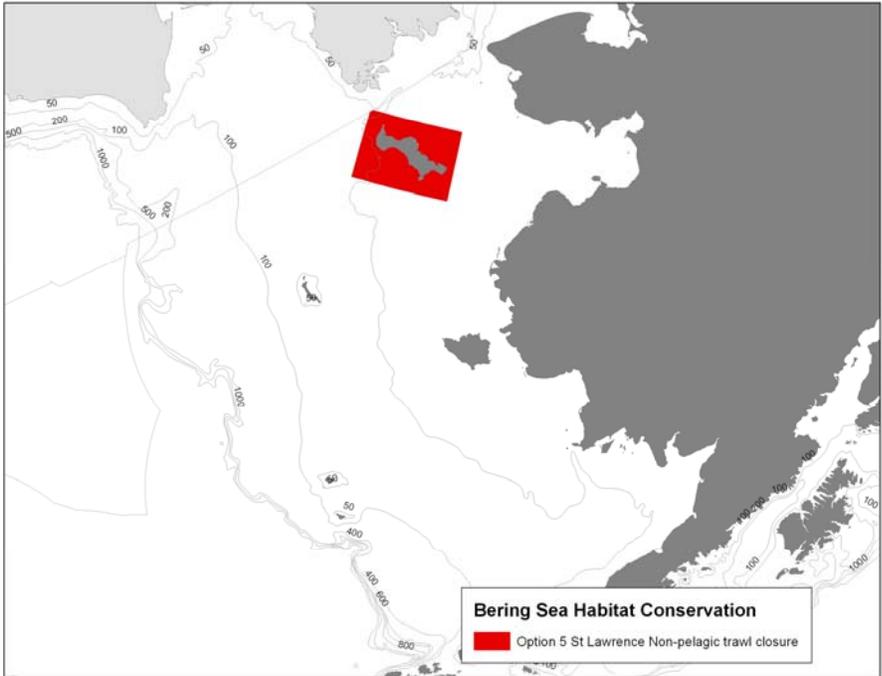


Figure ES- 9 Option 5. Close the area to non-pelagic trawling around St. Lawrence Island to conserve blue king crab habitat and minimize potential interactions with community use and subsistence fisheries taking place in nearshore areas.