

Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Alternatives

December 12, 2006 Council motion

The Council adopts the AP motion as alternatives for analysis under BSHC with the following modifications, and tasks staff to bring back an initial analysis for review.

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

Alternative 2: Open area approach. This alternative would prohibit trawling with bottom trawl gear outside of a designated 'open area'. The open area would be designated by utilizing fishing effort data through 2005 to define the open area. The designated open area would include the areas north of Bogoslof and south of Nunivak Island. The 10 minute strip in the Red King Crab Savings Area would remain open pursuant to current regulations. The Northward boundary of the open area would be configured such that the area south and west of St. Matthew Island is excluded from the open area to conserve blue king crab habitat. ~~There are three options for establishing the northward boundary of the open area, based on bottom trawl effort distribution. There is also one option that would require an Exempted Fishing Permit to fish outside of the designated open area.~~

~~Option 1: Smallest open area. Northern open boundary based on high effort intensity.~~

~~Option 2: Slightly larger open area. Northern boundary based on medium effort intensity.~~

Option 3: Larger open area. Northern boundary based on low effort intensity.

~~Option 4: Require Exempted Fishing Permit. Bottom trawling in the closed areas north of the open area boundary would only be authorized under an Exempted Fishing Permit.~~

~~(Figure 1)~~

Suboption 1: This suboption would be analyzed with the other open area approaches. In the region of Etolin Strait (near Nunavak Is.) adopt a sub-option to depict the differences between the Alternative adopted in the October 2006 and the staff Option 1 configuration for the lines between 165° W and 163°30' W. (Figure 2)

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 gear and substrate. A performance standard of at least 2.5 inches elevation of the sweep from the bottom would be required. NMFS will identify potential implementation options in the analysis for the management and enforcement of this standard.

~~Option 1: Gear modification and research closures. Areas would be closed to bottom trawling in the northern Bering Sea to research the impact of bottom trawling on benthic habitat and organisms, particularly *C. opilio*. The research areas would be located in areas that have not had much fishing effort between St. Matthew and St. Lawrence Islands. The research areas shall be established across bottom contours so as to include representative habitats and should focus on assessing habitat impacts of trawling by adopting a statistical design of open and closed areas.~~

Option 1: Gear modification and research closure area. The Northern Bering Sea Research Area closure would be located in area north of St. Matthew Island between St. Lawrence Islands. The area would be designated as closed to bottom trawl fishing. Future access to this area could occur

through the normal EFP or research fishing processes. Included in this area is a St. Matthew Island Crab Habitat Protection Area.

Alternative 4: Open area approach and gear modifications. This alternative would prohibit trawling with bottom trawl gear outside of a designated 'open area' (described in Alternative 2) and require gear modifications on all bottom flatfish trawl gear. The open area options are identical to Alternative 2. The gear modification language is the same as Alternative 3. There is also one option that would require an Exempted Fishing Permit to fish outside of the designated open area, and one option that establishes special open areas for research.

~~Option 1: Smallest open area. Northern open boundary based on high effort intensity.~~

~~Option 2: Slightly larger open area. Northern boundary based on medium effort intensity.~~

~~Option 3: Larger open area. Northern boundary based on low effort intensity.~~

~~Option 4: Require Exempted Fishing Permit. Bottom trawling in the closed areas north of the open area boundary would only be authorized under an Exempted Fishing Permit.~~

~~Option 5: Special Open Areas for Research. Special open areas to the north of the Northern open area boundary will be established for the purpose of conducting research to assess the impact of bottom trawling on benthic habitat and organisms, particularly *C. opilio*. The research areas shall be established across bottom contours so as to include representative habitat types.~~

Option 1: Gear modification and research closure area. The Northern Bering Sea Research Area closure would be located in area north of St. Matthew Island between St. Lawrence Islands. The area would be designated as closed to bottom trawl fishing. Future access to this area could occur through the normal EFP or research fishing processes. Included in this area is a St. Matthew Island Crab Habitat Protection Area.

Other Comments:

The Council selects the open area approach depicted from the October, 2006 Council Motion to utilize the same methodology used in the EFH EIS with more updated fishing effort information. Medium and high suboptions are not sufficiently inclusive of historically fished areas and therefore do not meet the problem statement.

The Council acknowledges the flatfish trawl industry will be meeting with Western Alaska communities in the vicinity of Etolin Strait to address concerns on the location of the open area in proximity to these communities. This information will be brought back to the Council in February 2007 in the form of a suboption to Alternative 2.

Except for defining a bottom trawl closure for a Northern Bering Sea Research Area the Council recommends not specifying criteria for research in this analysis to ensure any future research is based on the best available scientific information. The Council strongly supports future research in the designated Northern Bering Sea Research Area to focus on a research design on the effects of trawling in previously untrawled areas.

The Council requests staff to provide map figures in the document to be provided as detailed color maps in a large enough scale to interpret the slope, and other bathymetric features.

Additionally the Council will consider Bering Sea skate nurseries as a priority in the next HAPC cycle.

Lastly, the Council adopts the SSC's recommendation to gather more information on the Bering Sea Slope canyons and suggests this be named a top priority for NPRB research.

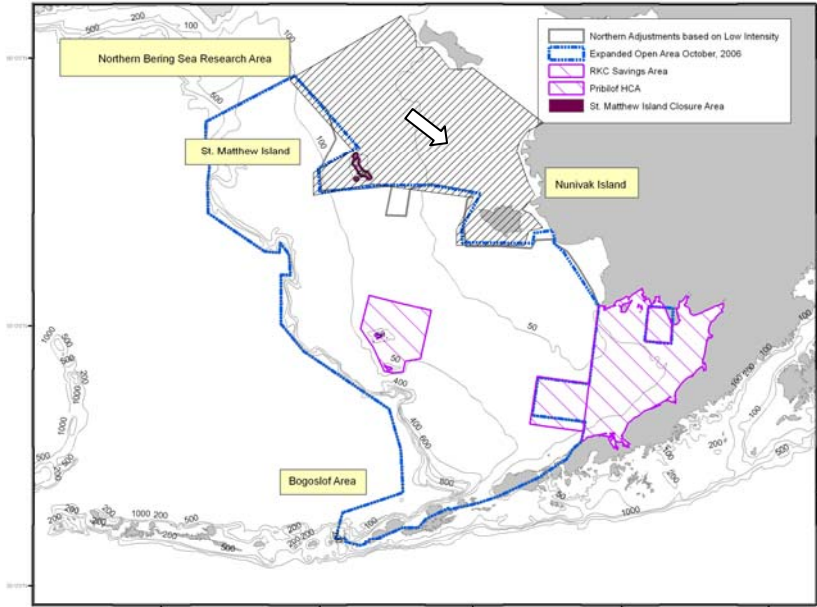


Figure 1. Open area approaches in Alternative 1, December 2006

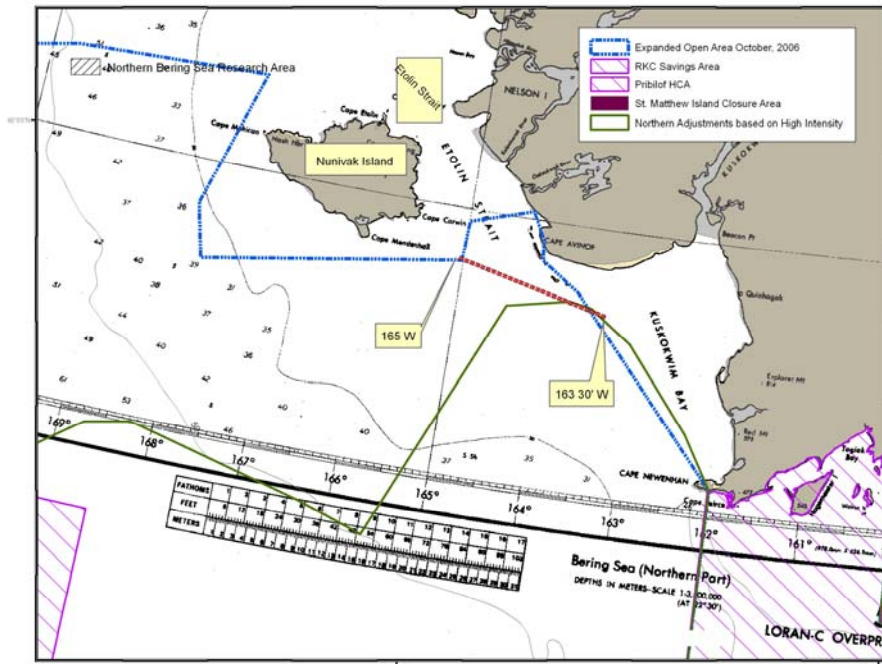


Figure 2. Proposed modification as a suboption to Alternative 1 in Etolin Strait.