

## **Council Motion – Arctic Fishery Management (June 2007)**

In October 2006, the Council directed staff to prepare a discussion paper on management of fisheries in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) waters of the Arctic Ocean. The Council is interested in exploring policy options, such as a Fishery Management Plan (FMP), to conserve marine resources and manage existing or potential future fisheries in this region. The Council received that report at the December 2006 meeting, and tasked staff to further develop options for fishery management in the Arctic.

At present, the Council does not have an FMP that provides comprehensive authority over fishery management issues in the EEZ waters of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Two of the Council's FMPs cover parts of the Arctic region for some species (i.e. the crab FMP and scallop FMP both cover part of the Chukchi Sea north of Bering Strait to Point Hope).

The Council has determined that a more deliberate and comprehensive management regime should be put in place for the Arctic region. This is partly in anticipation of potential fishery development in the region if climate conditions continue to warm. But this is also in response to some of the unique ecological conditions in the Arctic region, and the unique nature of the region's coastal communities, that merit more attention than has been given to this area previously.

The Council has reviewed several options for accomplishing its goal. These options were analyzed in a discussion paper prepared by staff for Council review in June 2007. These options include amending the existing FMPs so that they cover the Arctic region, writing a new Arctic FMP, or preparing a Fishery Ecosystem Plan. The issues each of these approaches raise have been evaluated by the Council at its June 2007 meeting, and the Council believes that a combination of amending the existing crab and scallop FMPs to terminate their coverage at Bering Strait and preparing a new comprehensive FMP for the Arctic region is the best approach. A single FMP covering the Alaskan Arctic would be a more holistic approach to marine resource management in the ecosystem. As part of that process, the Council intends that this new FMP contain elements of a Fishery Ecosystem Plan in that it should emphasize the unique habitats and resources of the Arctic and how marine resource management could be accomplished against this backdrop.

Therefore, the Council tasks staff with developing a draft Arctic Marine Resources FMP. This should include development of a problem statement or purpose and need statement, a suite of alternative management actions, and other supporting information required under the MSA, as amended in 2006.

An initial problem statement could include this language:

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the Council is authorized to conserve and manage the fishery resources of the Alaskan EEZ, including the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. To date, no large commercial fisheries have developed in these areas, and thus the Council has not had a compelling reason to develop Fishery Management Plans for these Arctic marine areas off Alaska.

But the environment for commercial fishery development in the Alaskan Arctic may be changing, with warming trends in ocean temperatures and changes in seasonal sea ice conditions potentially favoring the development of commercial fisheries.

Although at this time there are no such fisheries in the Alaskan EEZ in the Arctic Ocean, and no routine fish surveys conducted in the region, the Council is interested in exploring policy and management options to prepare for future change.

In addition, the Council recognizes the unique ecological conditions of the Arctic, and expresses its concern over potential effects of commercial fishing on local residents who rely on subsistence fishing and hunting. The

Council views the development of an Arctic Marine Resources FMP as an opportunity for implementing an ecosystem-based management policy that recognizes the unique issues in the Alaskan Arctic.

The Council also desires to clarify management authorities in the U.S. Arctic EEZ, and this action would accomplish that objective. A new Arctic Resources FMP would provide the Council a vehicle for addressing future management issues, including deferral of management to the State of Alaska.

The Council's initial preferred alternative will be to close the entire Arctic region, defined as the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas off Alaska, to commercial fishing for all marine species, including forage species, except for fisheries that have traditionally been prosecuted in these waters; currently, the only known commercial EEZ fishery in the Alaskan Arctic is for red king crab in the southern part of the Chukchi Sea. The Council will define its management approach in more detail in the Arctic Marine Resources FMP, including the conditions under which the Council will reconsider its policy for a general fishery closure.

Thus, the Council requests that the following alternatives be analyzed:

1. Status quo
2. Adopt an Arctic Marine Resources FMP, and amend the scallop and crab FMPs to terminate their geographic coverage at Bering Strait, with two options:
  - a) Close all waters north of Bering Strait to commercial fishing for all species, including forage species;
  - b) Close all waters north of Bering Strait to commercial fishing for all species, including forage species, but leave waters between Bering Strait and Point Hope open to commercial fishing for red king crab.

The Council will appoint members of an Arctic Marine Resources FMP Team to work with staff to develop a draft FMP.<sup>1</sup> Staff should consult with stakeholders to the extent practicable, including Arctic communities, outlining the Council's intent and objectives and seeking input and suggestions for future marine resource management in the Alaskan Arctic EEZ.

The Council, as part of this action, tasks staff with preparation of amendments to the existing scallop and crab FMPs to terminate their geographic coverage at Bering Strait. The Council requests that an initial draft Arctic Marine Resources FMP be presented to the Council at its December 2007 meeting. At that meeting, the Council will suggest further development of the draft FMP or send the draft FMP out for public review. An outline of the process required, and draft language for the amendments, should be part of the package to be presented to the Council at the December 2007 meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: After passing this motion, the Council recommended that the Arctic FMP be deferred to the Ecosystem Committee in the interim, and that the Council may appoint an Arctic FMP Team some time in the future.