

Harvest of “forage fish” in the GOA directed pollock fishery

Summary of Issue:

The area 620 directed pollock fishery opened January 20, and closed March 26, 2008. Most of the fishing occurred during the latter portion of March, by the Kodiak based catcher vessel (CV) fleet. Much of the harvest occurred in the Western portion of Shelikof Straits.

Under existing regulations, “forage species” are always closed to directed fishing. The maximum retainable amount (MRA) for forage species is 2%. During this late February-March fishing period, at least 34 “overages” of forage fish, (all “eulachon” smelt), were landed by CV’s delivering to Kodiak based shoreside processors. These overages ranged from 7% to 2105% over MRA’s. Amounts of “overage” smelt landed by CV’s were as high as 97,095 pounds.

Both federal and state regulations exist to prohibit retention of forage fish in excess of MRA’s for vessels. Federal regulations limit processing of forage species by processor vessels. However, no similar restrictions exist for processing of the forage fish by shoreside processors.

Two Kodiak shoreside processors purchased these smelt from their CV’s, including the overage amounts, and processed these fish for sales for bait and marine mammal food for the Alaska Sealife Center. While technically legal, these two shoreside processors voluntarily discontinued this processing when they were notified of the potential political issues involving forage fish.

The following are the existing federal and state regulations pertaining to forage fish.

679.20(i) Forage fish

(1) Definition.

See Table 2c to this part.

(2) Applicability.

The provisions of § 679.20(i) apply to all vessels fishing for groundfish in the BSAI or GOA, and to all vessels processing groundfish harvested in the BSAI or GOA.

(3) Closure to directed fishing.

Directed fishing for forage fish is prohibited at all times in the BSAI and GOA.

(4) Limits on sale, barter, trade, and processing.

The sale, barter, trade, or processing of forage fish is prohibited, except as provided in paragraph (i)(5) of this section.

(5) Allowable fishmeal production.

Retained catch of forage fish not exceeding the maximum retainable bycatch amount may be processed into fishmeal for sale, barter, or trade.

5 AAC 39.212. Forage Fish Management Plan

(a) This management plan governs the commercial harvesting of forage fish species in the waters of Alaska.

(b) The board finds that forage fish perform a critical role in the complex marine ecosystem by providing the transfer of energy from the primary and secondary producers to higher trophic levels. The higher trophic levels include many commercially important fish and shellfish species. Forage fish also serve as important prey species for marine mammals and seabirds.

(c) The board finds that abundant populations of forage fish are necessary to sustain healthy populations of commercially important species of salmon, groundfish, halibut, and shellfish.

(d) Except as otherwise provided in 5 AAC 03 forage fish may not be commercially taken.

(e) A vessel fishing in a directed groundfish fishery may retain a maximum allowable bycatch of forage fish equal to no more than two percent of the round weight or round weight equivalent of the groundfish on board the vessel.

(f) For the purposes of this section, "forage fish" means the following species of fish:

(1) Family Osmeridae (capelin, eulachon, and other smelts);

(2) Family Myctophidae (lanternfishes);

(3) Family Bathylagidae (deep-sea smelt);

(4) Family Ammodtidea (Pacific sand lance);

(5) Family Trichodontidae (Pacific sandfish);

(6) Family Pholidae (gunnels);

(7) Family Stichaeidae (pricklebacks, warbonnets, eelblennys, cockscombs, and shannys);

(8) Family Gonostomatidae (bristlemouths, lightfishes, and anglemouths);

(9) species of the Order Euphausiacea (krill).