

C-2(c) Crab bycatch in BSAI groundfish fisheries

Council Motion

The Council moves the following problem statement and alternatives for analysis:

Problem Statement

Total catch overfishing levels (OFLs) are specified annually for the ten crab stocks included in the Fishery Management Plan for Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands King and Tanner Crabs (FMP); these OFLs account for all sources of fishing mortality including directed crab fishery discards and bycatch mortality caused by groundfish, scallop, and Pacific halibut fisheries. Requirements to comply with Annual Catch Limits (ACLs), addressing uncertainty in OFL estimates, include Accountability Measures (AMs) that trigger a management action if an ACL is exceeded.

Crab bycatch in the directed crab and scallop fisheries is controlled by the State of Alaska, however current management structure does not link the crab and groundfish FMPs; if a crab ACL is exceeded due to bycatch mortality in a groundfish fishery the resulting AM would reduce directed crab fishery harvest the following year. Crab bycatch management measures were first adopted for BSAI groundfish trawl fisheries in 1986. These measures, established in the BSAI groundfish FMP, consist of triggered or fixed time and area closures and prohibited species catch (PSC) limits; PSC limits apply only to Bristol Bay red king, Bering Sea Tanner, and Bering Sea snow crab. There are no PSC limits for the remaining seven FMP crab stocks and the existing closure areas do not circumscribe the full distributional range of stocks they are intended to protect, thereby allowing bycatch mortality to occur without accrual towards PSC limits. Furthermore no bycatch management measures are imposed on the fixed gear groundfish or Pacific halibut sectors. In order to address crab bycatch in the BSAI groundfish fisheries the BSAI groundfish FMP must be amended.

Alternative 1 - No action

Maintain existing crab PSC limits and closure areas.

Alternative 2 - Fixed PSC limits

Crab PSC limits would be fixed in the BSAI groundfish FMP.

Alternative 3 - Variable PSC limits

Crab PSC limits would be set annually based on crab abundance.

Note: Different alternatives may be chosen for each FMP crab stock.

Components with options that could be applied to alternatives 2 and 3:

- Component 1: Closure areas
 - a) Existing closure areas

- b) Expand triggered closure areas to include full distribution of each crab stock
Option: Triggered closure areas encompassing distribution of vulnerable size/sex components of crab stock

Component 2: Timing of closure areas

- a) Fixed
 - i. Year-round
 - ii. Seasonal
Option: based on vulnerable life history or gear susceptibility
- b) Triggered
 - i. Full
 - ii. Stair-stepped (area closed expands as bycatch triggers are reached)

Component 3: Groundfish sectors/target fisheries included

- a) All trawl sectors
- b) All fixed gear sectors
- c) Halibut IFQ

Component 4: Overfished stocks

- a) Overfished/overfishing determination would trigger more restrictive PSC limits
- b) Overfished/overfishing determination would trigger more restrictive time and area closures

Component 5: Accountability measures

- a) Crab bycatch would accrue inseason towards groundfish sector PSC limit and an overage would trigger accountability measures during the subsequent season or year for that groundfish sector

Component 6: Catch accounting issues

- a) Account for PSC limit accrual against time/area closure thresholds on a crab fishing year (June-May)
- b) Account PSC limit accrual against time/area closure thresholds on a groundfish fishing year (January - December)

Other considerations noted in Council discussion:

Staff should consult with Crab Plan Team regarding further refinements to alternative framework noting that Council may further refine alternatives at preliminary review. Staff could consider further break-outs of sectors to fishery-levels as possible. Information in the analysis should include reporting bycatch both in numbers of crab as well as weight.