Changes in Alaska Pollock Management

The Alaska pollock harvest over the next three years could yield 116 million more pounds of fillets and surimi worth an additional $42 million. That's because the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council recently recommended changing the start of the second half of the season from June 1 to August 15, when the fish are heavier and better quality.

The council also recommended that trawlers harvesting pollock be required to choose between the Bering Sea/Aleutians region and the Gulf of Alaska region—rather than fishing in both, as many do now. That recommendation is not likely to change the pollock harvest or its value. But it could reduce the number of trawler-catchers in the Gulf of Alaska by about 27 percent.

The council's recommendations will take effect this season, if they are approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. Before making its recommendations, the council asked ISER to examine potential economic effects of delaying the second half of the pollock season and of establishing exclusive registration in the offshore fisheries of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska. ISER economists Matt Berman, Terry Smith, and Gunmar Knapp interviewed fishermen and processors and developed the first Alaska economic model that uses detailed information about fishermen's decisions in actual situations to project the effects of potential changes.

Pollock are the most common groundfish off Alaska, with the 1991 harvest exceeding 2.2 billion pounds—or about 70 percent of the entire groundfish harvest. Most pollock is taken from the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands region, but about 10 percent is harvested in the Gulf of Alaska. Pollock are harvested both by large vessels—some of which can catch and process fish—and by smaller boats that deliver to onshore processors.

During the 1980s, Alaska's offshore fisheries represented a new opportunity for the American fishing industry, as it took over the billions of pounds of groundfish that had previously gone to foreign vessels. But in the past few years the pollock harvest has remained roughly constant while the catching power of the pollock fleet (more boats, bigger boats, and more sophisticated gear) has continued to grow. The council is considering limiting access to the fishery, because it fears potential overfishing, shortened seasons, and other problems inherent to a growing fleet and finite stocks.

Alaska's coastal communities also recently protested that they do not get a fair share of the huge groundfish catch, because so much goes to offshore processors. In response, the council recommended that fishermen be required to deliver at least 35 percent of the Bering Sea pollock catch to onshore processors, and that offshore catcher-processors no longer be allowed to process pollock caught in the Gulf of Alaska.

Effects of Delayed Season

- The number of fish caught would change little if the season started August 15, but the yield would increase because pollock latten through the summer and fall before spawning in January and February. The council decided not to delay the start of the season later than August 15 for fear that rough fall weather might hurt smaller boats and ships.
because fishing later in the year would increase bycatch (adventitious catch of species reserved for other fisheries), especially herring.

- **The yield from non-roe pollock would increase by about 2 percent over the period from 1993 through 1995. Most of that increase would be in surimi (a paste used to make, among other things, imitation crab), but some would be in fillets and other products.**

- **The increase in pollock products would add about $4.7 million to income in Dutch Harbor and Akutan.**

- **The complex and unpredictable world market for pollock products makes it impossible to predict how prices would change in a later season.** But the improved quality of fish caught later in the year, and the fact that a later season would more closely correspond with the November-December period of peak demand for surimi in Japan, would tend to increase prices.

- **Operators of more than half the large catcher-processors would consider participating in other offshore fisheries if the second pollock season were delayed until August.** The operators did not, however, estimate how much effort they would put into other fisheries. It's possible that if many vessels from the large pollock fleet moved into the much smaller flatfish fishery they could hurt those already in the fishery.

- **Most offshore processors would consider processing salmon in Bristol Bay or Prince William Sound in the early summer, if the second pollock season started in August.** But projecting how interest might translate into participation is very difficult, because of the diversity, complexity, and volatility of the salmon industry.

- **Possible advantages for floating processors hoping to move into the salmon industry would be their ability to minimize handling of salmon and maximize freshness of products.** Also, if floating processors were able to collect live fish from hatchery pens, they could have an opportunity to develop new products.

- **Floating processors have the potential to help the existing salmon industry when the unexpected happens—when an onshore plant closes suddenly, or when there are very large or very late runs that the existing onshore processors can't handle. But they could also create long-run problems if they forced onshore processors out of business and then moved on, leaving fishermen without either traditional or new markets.**

- **Any offshore processors who moved into salmon processing would have to comply with state regulations that govern fisheries inside the 3-mile limit.**

**Effects of Trawler Registration**

- **Any form of exclusive registration will cost the trawlers as a group more than it benefits some vessels because it forces the larger vessels to sit idle in port more of the time or to pursue less valuable fisheries.**

- **Exclusive registration for trawlers is not likely to change the overall pollock harvest or its value.** Rather, it will slightly re-distribute the harvest and raise costs for the fleet as a whole.

- **Trawlers that operate out of Kodiak and deliver to onshore processors stand to benefit most from this change, because they already fish almost exclusively in the Gulf of Alaska. They could gain as much as 11 percent more of the harvest, or up to 8 million more pounds.**

- **Trawlers that operate out of Dutch Harbor and Akutan stand to lose the most under exclusive registration, because in the past they have been most likely to operate in both regions.**

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