



Alaska Marine Policy Forum

Summary from Wednesday, January 15, 2020

Host: Molly McCammon, Alaska Ocean Observing System

Notes by Holly Kent

The Alaska Marine Policy Forum is a bimonthly teleconference for Alaskans to network and share information about marine policy, budgets, and legislation at state, national, and international levels, sponsored by Alaska Sea Grant and the Alaska Ocean Observing System. Contact dawn.montano@alaska.edu to receive email reminders and agendas for upcoming calls, and summary notes following each call.

Alaska Congressional Delegation Update

Carina Nichols, Sen. Sullivan's office

- The *Save Our Seas 2.0* bill, regarding marine debris and co-sponsored by Senator Sullivan, has passed the Senate unanimously. The bill now passes to seven committees in the House.
- The new trade agreement signed between the US and China includes seafood.
- The Senator is looking into the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposed critical habitat designation for humpback whales.
- The Senator has proposed the [Ocean, Coastal and Estuarine Acidification Necessitates \(OCEAN\) Research Act](#) bill funding ocean acidification efforts.
- Dr. Neil Jacobs was nominated to be the lead NOAA Administrator and the Senator will be meeting with him soon to discuss Alaska's priorities.
- Senator Sullivan's office has begun discussions on priorities and goals for the upcoming year and invites constituents to bring any concerns to their attention.

Liz Harpold, Alaska State Representative Dan Ortiz' Office

- Alaska House bill 41, *Shellfish Projects; Hatcheries; Fees*, sponsored by Rep. Ortiz and co-sponsored by Rep. Vance and Rep. Story, will be taken up in the Senate Finance Committee. This bill will create a state regulated program for shellfish enhancement.

Rachel Baker, Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G)

- ADF&G is continuing the administration of the 2016 Gulf of Alaska (GOA) pink salmon federal fishery disaster. Please contact Rachel at rachel.baker@alaska.gov with any questions you may have regarding this issue.

Cod Fishery Closure in the Gulf of Alaska

Steve Barbeaux, NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Science Center

- Steve is the lead Stock Assessment Author for GOA Pacific Cod.
- Pacific Cod has played an important role as a food and economic resource in the state of Alaska for millennia starting with the first commercial fishery in the 1800s which subsequently crashed in the late 1930s and rose again to dominance 50 years later.
- The fishery peaked in 1990 and then began a slow decline despite relatively low fishing pressure to a new low in 2009. The stock again began increasing into 2014.

- Starting in late summer/early fall of 2014 waters in the GOA became extremely warm and continued warming through December of 2016. This marine heatwave later became known as the “blob”. Temperatures were measured at 4.5 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than normal.
- The dramatic changes to the ecosystem, seabird die-offs, increase in gray whale strandings, reduction in phytoplankton production, and reductions in the populations of small fish at the base of the food chain severely impacted the cod population.
- The cod catch was reduced by 80% in 2018. The drop in valuation of this fishery went from \$100M to \$32M.
- The blob appears to have impacted the cod fishery in two ways: the warmer water sped up the metabolism of adult fish at a time when their prey was not available leading to starvation and the hatch rates of cod eggs declined precipitously in the warmer waters.
- The stock status dropped for 2020 to below the 20% unfished level requiring federal closure of the fishery to maintain a minimum level needed to support the endangered steller sea lion population.
- Even though water temperatures cooled in 2017 and 2018, summer water temperatures in the Gulf in 2019 exceeded those that peaked during the blob years.
- The fishery was declared a disaster for 2017 and looking forward in the face of climate change, it doesn’t look good for cod in the future for the GOA.

Nicole Kimball, North Pacific Fishery Management Council

- Nicole serves on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council which manages the federal fisheries off the coast of Alaska from 3 to 200 miles offshore.
- The council itself does not determine an overfishing level or allowable biological catch level; a process is used that starts in December when the council and the public receive reports on stock assessments for every federal species that the council manages.
- The stock assessment reports include recommendations for overfishing levels and allowable biological catch level that serve as reference points for the council.
- The council’s Scientific Committee then uses those reference points to set annual catch limits call Total Allowable Catch (TAC).
- The council then sets the final numbers for overfishing and catch limits either at or below those determined by the Scientific Committee.
- The stock assessment report received from the Alaska Fisheries Science Center reported that, due in large part to warming waters, the cod stocks in the GOA have been negatively affected throughout the population structure including larval, juvenile, and adult fish. That makes it very difficult to predict future stock levels.
- The Magnuson-Stevens Act sets a low biomass threshold at which point the stock is determined to be “overfished”. The cod stock for the GOA is very close to this threshold.
- Stocks can be determined to be “overfished” even when there has been no fishing activity, this is due to the language in the Magnuson-Stevens Act that has no other term for stocks that reach the low biomass threshold.
- In addition to the stock assessment reports that the council receives, they also have to consider Steller Sea lion protection measures under the Endangered Species Act designed to reserve a portion of the cod stock as prey for these marine mammals.
- Under the federal system all cod are accounted for, which includes those incidentally caught during other species’ fisheries as bycatch. This further reduces the total available catch figure determined by the council.
- The state then opened a small state water cod fishery for 2020 and reduced their total allowable catch by 35%.

- The council's decision to close the federal cod fishery for the GOA in 2020 was based on low biomass projections, Steller Sea lion protection measures, the reduced small state fishery projection, and incidental catch projections.
- This fishery is very data rich and the council has taken a very precautionary approach using the best available information and considering the uncertainty with respect to warming waters.

Announcements

- Molly McCammon: During the Alaska Forum on the Environment on Friday, February 14 the *Marine Debris Summit – Leveraging our Collective Efforts, Identifying Needs and Moving Forward* session will be hosted by AOOS, NOAA, and the EPA.
- Greg Smith from the office of Representative Andi Story: The Rep. continues working on House Bill 116 to streamline leases for aquaculture. Another issue on the horizon with respect to budgeting is the discussion on shifting the cost of commercial harvest shellfish testing to the growers from the state.
- Bree Turner, NOAA's Office of Coastal Management: NOAA is working with Alaska Sea Grant and will be offering some trainings in Alaska on estimating local marine economies. The Anchorage training will be March 16-17 and in Homer March 18-19. [For more information.](#)
- Gay Sheffield, Alaska Sea Grant: Gay suggests that a future topic for this forum could be the issues surrounding the movement of the cod long-line fishery into the northern Bering Sea very late in the fall. The discussion should include industry or fleet representation.

Next Alaska Marine Policy Forum call: March 18, 2020, 1 pm Alaska time.