



THE BERING SEA/ALEUTIAN ISLANDS POLLOCK FISHERY

A Case Study of Successful Fisheries Management

The Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands (BS/AI) pollock fishery is the largest U.S. fishery. Since the U.S. established a 200-mile fishing zone in 1976, pollock harvests have averaged 2.5 billion pounds annually on a sustainable basis. In recent years, the BS/AI pollock fishery has accounted for about 30 percent of all U.S. seafood landings by weight. The pollock resource in U.S. waters off Alaska remains abundant and robust, and the fishery has been certified as sustainably managed by the independent Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The Pollock Resource is Healthy and Abundant. In 2004, scientists estimated the abundance of adult pollock in U.S. waters of the Bering Sea at more than 20 billion pounds, which represents an historically high level of abundance. The large continental shelf off Alaska's coast and the favorable ocean currents extant in the region provide a rich mix of nutrients to sustain large populations of pollock and other groundfish species. Conservative management ensures that these important fish stocks are sustainably managed.

There is Good Fisheries Science and Managers Take a Precautionary Approach. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), an agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce, conducts trawl surveys annually and hydro-acoustic surveys at least triennially to assess the abundance of pollock and other North Pacific groundfish species. The survey results, and other relevant data and information, form the basis for estimates of pollock abundance and determinations of the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) level, which indicates the amount of fish that can be harvested on a sustainable basis. Where there is uncertainty due to lack of data, fishery scientists and managers employ a precautionary approach, which requires managers to act conservatively when there is uncertainty. To ensure that a broad range of scientific views are taken into account, NMFS scientists work closely with state and university scientists.

Fishery Managers Set Conservative Harvest Levels. Based on the fish population models developed by NMFS, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, which is advised by its scientific panel, recommends the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) level. The TAC is set at, or below, the ABC level. All fish harvested, whether processed at-sea or onshore, is weighed to ensure an accurate catch accounting. All fish caught counts against the quota for that species. Fisheries close when the allotted harvest level is reached.



There is a Comprehensive Federal Fishery Observer Program. Every pollock catcher/processor vessel carries onboard two federal fishery observers to monitor and record catches and to conduct scientific research. The observers are trained and certified by NMFS, and they sample 99% of pollock tows by catcher/processor vessels. Pollock catcher-only vessels 125 feet or longer carry one observer and there is 30 percent observer coverage on vessels under 125 feet in length. The fishing industry pays the cost of observer coverage. The North Pacific groundfish observer program is the most comprehensive fishery observer program in the nation.

Pollock Fishing Has Minimal Impact on the Habitat. Pollock vessels tow cone-shaped, mid-water trawl nets to harvest the resource. Pollock swim in enormously large schools above the ocean floor. The fishing nets do not drag along the ocean bottom. In fact, federal regulations prohibit “bottom trawling” for pollock.

The Pollock Fishery Is One of the “Cleanest” Fisheries in the World. Bycatch is defined in U.S. fisheries law as fish that are harvested but discarded either for economic or regulatory reasons. For U.S. pollock catcher/processors, pollock comprises almost 99 percent of what is caught in the net. Of the species allowed by law to be retained, much of it is also processed. The pollock catcher/processor fleet annual discard rate of approximately 0.5% of the total catch compares very favorably with the average bycatch (or discard) rate for world fisheries of 25%.

There Is Full Utilization of the Pollock Resource. Federal regulations require that all pollock and Pacific cod be retained regardless of the groundfish species being targeted. Pollock processors produce fillets, roe and *surimi*, a minced fish product used to make imitation crab from edible portions of the fish. Many U.S. pollock processors also make fishmeal from inedible portions of the fish.

Fish Harvesting Cooperatives Resolved Problems of Excess Fishing Capacity and Provide Conservation Benefits. Pollock fishermen formed fish harvesting cooperatives to “rationalize” fishing activities, including resolving problems of overcapacity, promoting conservation and enhancing utilization of fishery resources. Under a co-op arrangement, fewer vessels are fishing and daily catch rates by participating vessels are significantly reduced since the “race for fish” ended in 1999. In the past several years, catcher/processors also increased the amount of products produced from each pound of pollock by almost 50 percent. For more information on how fish harvesting cooperatives work, visit the At-sea Processors Association’s (APA’s) website at www.atsea.org.

Steller Sea Lion Population Declines Are Not Attributable to Pollock Fishing. In December 2002, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) issued a report stating that killer whale predation and environmental changes, and not fishing, were the leading hypotheses for explaining sea lion population declines. The NAS panel chair noted, “The sea lions seem fit, indicating that they have enough food...” These NAS findings refute unfounded statements that fishing reduced the availability of prey species for sea lions, causing nutritional stress and resulting in population declines.

For more information about the Bering Sea pollock fishery, please contact the NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region office at (907) 586-7221 or the North Pacific Fishery Management Council at (907) 271-2809.

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