

# Facing the Unthinkable, Bering Sea Crabbers Go to Feds and State as Council Gets Underway

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The stakes could not be higher for Bering Sea crab fishermen and processors as they face a second year of low survey numbers and high uncertainty in population models. Last year with a closure of Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC) the fleet lost \$200 million in ex-vessel prices. The cost of lost revenue to processors, communities and businesses and schools within them, and markets is not included in that number.

Snow crab has all but disappeared in the eastern Bering Sea. Bristol Bay Red King Crab, which would open October 15, is at historic lows. Tanner crab is at the lower end of its historic abundance.

These crab fisheries have been under the most sophisticated management system in the world — what the North Pacific Fishery Management Council calls a ‘rationalized’ fishery — where effort (the number of vessels) is consolidated and harvesters are issued catch shares based on their past history. Rationalization is designed to protect the resource and ensure sustainable harvests.

But it has been "anything but that" according to Jamie Goen, executive director of the Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers (ABSC). This is the first time a rationalized fishery has seen species collapse — snow crab management is now in a rebuilding phase — and the rapid decline of BBRKC and continued decline of tanner (bairdi) crab.

At the mid-September meeting of the Crab Plan Team, an advisory body to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC), scientists and managers recommended Overfishing Limits (OFLs) and Acceptable Biological Catches (ABCs) to the Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) of the NPFMC. On Monday, the SSC will analyze these recommendations and make their own submission to the Council itself. The federal NPFMC will only decide these two management levels.

Because crab are jointly managed in Alaska by the state and the federal governments, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game will issue the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) on Thursday, October 6, after the NPFMC takes final action on the OFL and ABC.

Before that, the crab fleet hopes that both the state and the federal managers will take a close look at the uncertainties surrounding the management decisions for the past several years, the gaps in data and knowledge that could be partially bridged by allowing a small fishery, and the lack of response to declines in BBRKC for the past 15 years.

Gaps include northern Bering Sea snow crab and hybrid crab, both of which are surveyed and caught, but are not included in the stock assessments. Uncertainties include fitting the model to the data, which has been described by the modelers last year as needing "creativity."

Last Tuesday, Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers sent a letter to Doug Vincent-Lang, ADF&G Commissioner; Simon Kinneen, Chairman of the NPFMC; and the two co-chairs of the SSC Sherri Dressel and Franz Mueter, all involved with the decisions that will come out of the Council meeting next week, outlining their concerns.

“Alaska’s Bering Sea crab fisheries are in unprecedented times with two of the three major commercial crab fisheries closed or at historic lows last year. Based on the 2022 NOAA Fisheries summer bottom trawl survey, these historic lows are expected to persist for some time. These ... fisheries ... are part of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Crab Rationalization Program, a mature rationalized fishery created in 2005 and intended to create economic stability and improve safety. We are experiencing anything but,” ABSC's Goen wrote.

“This is the first rationalized fishery in the country to suffer this magnitude of fishery collapse and correlated economic harm. ... [W]e urge you to help us find a better path forward.

“We ask that you create some immediate flexibility in the system to adjust to the unique situation ... using the best available science and moving crab stocks towards more sustainability, while also balancing the needs of fishing communities consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The uncertainties in current status, stock estimates, and management leave some room to consider



the immediate human dimensions being impacted by allowing for a small, directed crab fishery to balance the needs of fishermen and the associated fishing communities.”

Goen’s idea is to limit a directed fishery and require captains and crew to “.continue gathering essential data that only a pot fishery can collect.”

“If we can’t fish [at past levels], let us be platforms for research,” she said on Wednesday.

In her letter, she asked for flexibility for Bering Sea snow crab, “to set at least some level of harvest for the upcoming 2022/2023 season. Given the uncertainty in the Bering Sea snow crab stock assessment, paired with the unaccounted-for portion of the same stock in the Northern Bering Sea and hybrid populations, we ask for some level of harvest even if we are approaching harvest control rules, noting that collective fishing impacts have not come close to exceeding snow crab acceptable biological catch levels.

“At a minimum, if other sectors are allowed up to 4.35 million animals in bycatch through prohibited species catch limits while the snow crab stock is at low levels, then the direct crab fishery should be allowed at least that same amount, in line with the Magnuson-Stevens Act requirement to allocate fairly and equitably among sectors and to consider the needs of fishing communities.” The Bering Sea trawl sector is allowed to catch 4.35 million crabs as bycatch in the groundfish fishery.

Goen asks “to have a small [crab] fishery this season while also protecting the signal of recruitment for the snow crab from the 2022 summer trawl survey. We are eager to hear recommendations of the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), ADFG managers, and others on how to best help crab stocks recover. ABSC will provide recommendations to the Council at their upcoming October meeting to protect the centers of abundance for that recruitment signal.”

In addition to that letter, ABSC has requested an emergency order from the Secretary of Commerce to close the BBRKC savings Area (RKCSA) to all types of gear. It is currently open to pelagic trawl, longline, pot gear, although the pot cod sectors voluntarily avoided it last year and the crab fleet was closed so didn’t fish red king crab at all. The area is closed by regulation to bottom trawling year-round, no exceptions.

In a discussion paper authored by the Council staff earlier this year, the position of pelagic (mid-water) trawls while fishing for pollock, actually touch the sea floor on average about 80% of the time. In the closed area, which protected mating and molting BBRKC, those gear could be killing unobserved breeding and vulnerable molting red king crab.

The request to close the area to all gear types noted that the Council has been aware of the BBRKC decline for 15 years, since 2007, but has done nothing to address the decline or provide additional protection to the BBRCK population.

“The impacts the Bering Sea crab fleet and associated communities, processors, and support businesses are facing is devastating,” Goen said in her letter to Vincent-Lang. “Another closure will result in further loss of the new entrants and small, independent, family businesses and further devastate crab-dependent communities, counter to the goals of catch share programs as outlined in NOAA’s national policy and unprecedented in a mature rationalized fishery. We ask for your willingness to think outside the box, employ flexibility in the management and science systems, and look for creative solutions. Thank you for considering our comments and we look forward to you helping to bring back Alaska’s 3rd most valuable fishery.”

The crabbers requests will be on Monday’s docket for the [SSC meeting](#) first, and will be taken up by the Council three days later.

The SSC’s discussion and recommendations to the Council will be key for Bering Sea crab. Some of what the CPT reports are the statistical changes between 2021, when the first low population abundances were seen, and the 2022 survey numbers. For snow crab, the 2021 numbers, which sent a shock wave through academia and industry, were the first data after a cancelled survey season in 2020 due to the pandemic.

The CPT notes “The 2022 biomass of snow crab legal males declined 44% from 2021 (the 2021 survey declined 69% from 2019), while industry-preferred size males ( $\geq 102$  mm CW) increased 9% from 2021 (the 2021 survey declined 56% from 2019), and immature male biomass declined 23% from 2021 (the 2021 survey declined 96% from 2019). Mature female biomass declined 16% from 2021 (2021 was a 70% decline from 2019), and immature female biomass increased 8,700% (after a 99% decrease in 2021).

For BBRKC, the CPT’s intro describes a shift in the locations of mature male and female red king crab abundances in Bristol Bay and goes on to note that “Size frequency distributions for male and female red king crab continue to indicate limited recruitment. Mature females were mostly located within the center of Bristol Bay and biomass increased slightly (3%) from the 2021 survey low. Legal male abundance was concentrated in the mid- to lower-bay and mature male biomass increased 38% from the 2021 survey.”

For tanner crab, the CPT report said the estimated mature male biomass (MMB) “. . . for 2021/22 was 62.05 thousand t. MMB has been on a declining trend since 2014/15 when it peaked at 117.3 thousand t, and it is approaching the very low levels seen in the mid-1990s to early 2000s (1993 to 2003 average: 37.6 thousand t).”

The CPT also noted that this summer’s surveys showed “Estimated biomass decreased from 2021 for all size-sex categories of Tanner crab west of 166 degrees W, while Tanner crab results were more variable east of 166 degrees W. Mature female biomass decreased 36% in the east and 15% in the west. There was a prevalence of old shell females in the west at the larger sizes with evidence of some recruitment of smaller females in the east. It was noted that many Tanner recruit pulses don’t appear to move into the mature population. Mature males decreased 9% in the west and increased 74% in the east. Tanner crab size frequencies show the stock remains depressed.”

Recruitment for tanners looked good, however. The CPT noted that tanner recruitment “has been increasing since 2020, when it reached its lowest level (67 million) since 2012. For 2022, estimated recruitment is 1,362 million crab. Average recruitment over the previous 10 years

(2012-2021; not including 2022) is 313 million crab, which is ~13% less than the long-term (1982-2021) mean of 408 million crab.”

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