



THE ALASKA POLLOCK FISHERY

A Case Study of Successful Fisheries Management

The Alaska pollock fishery is the largest U.S. fishery and one of the largest food fisheries in the world. Most of the Alaska pollock fishing in U.S. waters occurs in the Bering Sea, although there is also a smaller fishery in the Gulf of Alaska. In recent years, the 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 both the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska fisheries have been certified as sustainably managed by the independent Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). Alaska pollock products are also identified as the best environmental choice for seafood consumers by major environmental non-governmental organizations. (See page 2 for more details.)

The Pollock Resource is Healthy and Abundant. The large continental shelf off Alaska's coast and the favorable ocean currents 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. Since the U.S. established a 200-mile fishing zone in 1976, Alaska pollock harvests have averaged 1.1 million metric tons annually on a sustainable basis.

Fisheries Managers Take a Precautionary Approach and Base All Decisions on Sound Science. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), an agency within the U.S. Department of Commerce, conducts annual trawl surveys and regular hydro-acoustic surveys 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, fishery scientists and managers employ a precautionary approach, which requires managers to act conservatively. To ensure that a broad range of scientific views are taken into account, NMFS scientists work closely with state and university fishery experts.

Fishery Managers Set Conservative Harvest Levels. Based on the fish population models developed by NMFS scientists, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council determines the annual pollock harvest level. The North Pacific Council never sets the harvest level higher than the ABC level established by the panel of federal, state and university scientists that advises fishery managers. All pollock harvested, whether processed at-sea or on-shore, is weighed at the time of catch to ensure an accurate catch accounting. The Alaska pollock fisheries close when the allotted harvest level is reached.

There is a Comprehensive Federal Fishery Observer Program. The North Pacific groundfish observer program is the most comprehensive fishery observer program in the world. Each pollock catcher/processor vessel carries onboard two federal fishery observers to monitor and record catches and to conduct scientific research. Observers are also assigned to all onshore processing facilities, and all pollock catcher vessels 125 feet or longer carry one observer. These observers are trained and certified by NMFS and report data electronically as it is collected. Through a unique industry-initiated program called SeaState, pollock fishermen know exactly how much of the quota is remaining at any given time.

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 well above the ocean floor, and the nets are designed to minimize impact to the environment. In fact,

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federal regulations prohibit “bottom trawling” for pollock in the Bering Sea. Also, fishery managers have closed pollock fishing in large areas of the ocean to minimize competition between fishing vessels and marine mammals that might prey on pollock. This ecosystem-based approach to managing the Alaska pollock fishery is an example of progressive fisheries management.

The Pollock Fishery Is One of the “Cleanest” Fisheries in the World. Bycatch is defined in U.S. fisheries law as fish other than the targeted species that are harvested and discarded, either for economic or regulatory reasons. Pollock comprises almost 99 percent of what is caught in the Alaska pollock fishery. Of the species allowed by law to be retained, much of it is also processed. For example, a report filed by the pollock catcher/processor fleet reports an annual discard rate of only 0.5% of the total catch.

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. Most U.S. Alaska 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. For the catcher/processor fleet, optimizing and rationalizing the fishery has resulted in a 50 percent increase in the amount of fish products produced from each pound of pollock harvested.

The Alaska Pollock Fishery is Widely Recognized as a Well-Managed, Sustainable Fishery. As mentioned above, the Alaska pollock fishery is certified as responsibly and sustainably managed by the Marine Stewardship Council, an international non-government organization founded in 1995 by the World Wildlife Fund. Many Alaska pollock products bear the MSC’s “blue seal” eco-label. (See www.msc.org for more information.) Currently, there are 672 Alaska pollock products worldwide that carry the MSC logo.

In recent years, a number of environmental organizations have issued seafood consumer guides. Alaska pollock is identified as a “best choice” on a number of lists, including the lists published by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Program <http://www.montereybayaquarium.org>, Environmental Defense <http://www.edf.org/page.cfm?tagID=15890>, and the Blue Ocean Institute <http://blueocean.org/seafood/>.

In addition, 15 environmental groups, represented by the Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions, recognize the MSC as providing “a fishery certification, traceability and seafood eco-labeling system that is credible and fully consistent with international guidelines from FAO and ISEAL.” The group includes Blue Ocean Institute, Environmental Defense Fund, Living Oceans Society, Monterey Bay Aquarium, Natural Resources Defense Council, and World Wildlife Fund – US, among others. These organizations encourage businesses to purchase MSC certified products as part of their sustainable seafood policies.
<http://www.solutionsforseafood.org/additionalresources/0000/0001/CV - Public FAQ.pdf>

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