



THE ALASKA POLLOCK FISHERY *A Case Study of Successful Fisheries Management*

The Alaska pollock fishery is the largest U.S. fishery. 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 as well. 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) and by the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute's Responsible Fisheries Management program, which is based on UN Food and Agriculture Organization standards for responsible fishing.

The Pollock Resource is Healthy and Abundant. 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. Since the U.S. established a 200-mile fishing zone in 1976, Alaska pollock harvests have averaged 2.5 billion pounds annually on a sustainable basis.

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 scientists, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council recommends an 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 onshore, is weighed 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 fleet of pollock catcher/processor vessels carries onboard two federal fishery observers to monitor and record catches and to conduct scientific research. Observers are also assigned to all pollock at onshore processing facilities, and pollock catcher-only vessels carry one observer. The observers are trained and certified by NMFS. The North Pacific groundfish observer program is the most comprehensive fishery observer program in the U.S.

Pollock Fishing Has Minimal Impact on the Habitat. Pollock vessels tow cone-shaped, mid-water trawl nets to harvest the resource. Pollock swim in 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. Also, fishery managers have closed large areas of the ocean to pollock fishing to minimize competition between fishing vessels and marine mammals that 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 that are harvested but discarded either for economic or regulatory reasons. 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. For example, an annual report filed by the pollock catcher/processor fleet reports an annual discard rate of approximately 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*, a minced fish product used to make imitation crab from edible portions of the fish. Alaska pollock processors also make fishmeal and fish oil 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. For more information on how fish harvesting cooperatives work, visit the At-sea Processors Association’s (APA’s) website at www.atsea.org.

The Alaska Pollock Fishery is Independently Certified 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 co-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.) The Alaska pollock fishery is also certified under the FAO-based Responsible Fisheries Management program. (See www.alaskaseafood.org for more information.) The Alaska pollock at-sea processors' fishing cooperative cited above was the first recipient the *Stewardship and Sustainability Award* granted by a leading U.S. federal science agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

For more information about Alaska pollock visit the At-sea Processors Association's website at www.atsea.org or the Genuine Alaska Pollock Producers website at www.alaskapollock.org.