

# THE ALASKA Fish Factor

Covering  
Alaska's  
Commercial Fisheries

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Special to the *Tundra Times*

Bering Sea crabbers pulled their pots for a final time this year when the opilio Tanner crab ( snow ) fishery closed March 15. It's expected the fleet of nearly 250 boats will have taken the 207 million pound opie quota. Bering Sea processors handled up to 27 million pounds during each week of the two month opie season. Crabbing for their bigger cousin, the bairdi, can continue by regulation through March 31. That fishery, which opened in early Nov., has a harvest guideline of 38 million pounds. The State warned a bairdi closure could come sooner.

To ensure high numbers of opilio crab weren't taken as bycatch along with the bairdi, the Alaska Crab Coalition petitioned Fish and Game to impose a protective measure. Commissioner Carl Rosier put

crabbers on 48 hour notice of a bairdi closure if observers onboard catcher processors see too many opilios coming up in the crab pots.

While there was talk earlier in the season if winter ice prevented the fleet from catching all of the crab quota, the Bering Sea might reopen in May, it's very unlikely. The catch performance in both crab fisheries tracked nicely with Fish and Game's expectations this year, according to regional management biologist Rance Morrison. That's good news for herring fishermen from Togiak to Norton Sound, as processing lines can now be ready for their catches.

**BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IT'S HERRING TIME IN ALASKA.** While the first big surge of herring isn't expected to hit Kah Shakes near Ketchikan until early April, pounders near Craig and Klawock already have their roe on kelp gear in the water. Fewer pounders are sharing a

reduced quota in the second year of the fishery. This year 209 fishermen are participating, down from 248 last year. Each pound is allowed 1.2 tons of herring and 292 blades of kelp which are four to six feet long. Last year, pounders had a quota of 1.6 tons and 310 kelp blades.

To obtain their pricey roe on kelp product, fishermen purse seine the herring and transfer them to net enclosures. Inside, the kelp is hung in rows upon which the herring lay threads of pearl-like eggs. The kelp can become encrusted with deposits up to an inch thick on each side. After the herring are spawned out, they are released from the pound and the kelp is harvested.

Last year was a learning experience for new pounders, and fishermen averaged only about \$3.50 a pound for mostly poor product. Spawn on kelp can command the highest price of any fisheries product in Alaska. Fishermen at Hoonah Sound last year got over \$15,999 a ton for their roe kelp, with Prince William Sound pounders getting over \$18,000 per ton.

**NORTON SOUND FISHERMEN ARE GEARING UP** for the summer red king crab fishery. The Board of Fisheries recently voted to make the Sound a super exclusive registration zone, meaning vessels which opt to fish there can't go after king crab anywhere else. The

ruling gives local fishermen a chance to develop a successful small boat crab fleet in a fishery which has been dominated by large vessels which can take the small quota in just a few days.

While a summer king crab fishery would make a big difference to an area that's facing a depressed herring market and declining salmon stocks, pressure is on the local fishermen to perform. "If they can't demonstrate they can harvest the resource, it's very likely larger fishing interests will take this to court to try and regain lost ground," says Fish and Game biologist Charlie Lean in Nome.

The Norton Sound Economic Development Corp. has budgeted \$200,000 for loans to help fishermen get the equipment they need for the red king crab fishery. Executive director John Jemowauk says the group is also arranging buyers as well as transportation to get the crab quickly to the fresh market. The fishery will open a month early on July 1 to allow more time to harvest the 300,000 pound quota.

**PRICES FOR PINK SALMON AREN'T EXPECTED TO BE LOWER THAN LAST YEAR**, which at an average of 15 cents a pound, isn't great news. At least for

the short term, market conditions won't make things much better. The wholesale price of canned pinks has dropped dramatically over the past year. An exclusive sales survey of every item on supermarket shelves showed canned salmon sales have dropped 22 percent from one year ago, according to the Wall Street Journal. Canned salmon is the second fastest declining category in supermarket sales, following frozen prepared vegetables.

To make matters worse, it appears there will be a substantial carry over of 1992 canned pack by the time the projected 107 million pinks arrive this summer. The status of frozen pinks is also shaky, as the market for skinless boneless filets has not taken off as some hoped, and large amounts remain in inventory. The much heralded markets for value-added products are still being developed, and won't arrive soon enough to boost fish prices this year.

Steve Grabacki of Graystar Pacific Seafoods calls "value-added" a buzz words which means putting additional labor and/or ingredients into a product, but doesn't guarantee added profit. "Most purchasing managers of restaurant chains, supermarkets and wholesalers don't use or tolerate the term. They prefer 'further' or 'secondary processed,'" he says. On a related note, Grabacki reveals McDonald's has turned a thumbs down to adding salmon nuggets to its menus. Nuggets can continue to be sold at the Kodiak restaurant only, which test marketed the product last year. "Wider distribution in Alaska might be possible, if sales at the Kodiak restaurant were stronger," Grabacki reports.

(Sheri Collins, Nome and Kerry Beebe, Petersburg also contributed to the above.)