

# Herring bycatch poses serious problem

by Harold Sparck  
for the Tundra Times

Closing commercial fisheries and possible curtailment of subsistence fishing in Western Alaska in 1990 has forced the state to engage the Seattle fishing empire in the Bering Sea over eastern Bering Sea herring.

## OPINION

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game Division of Commercial Fisheries suggested in a report to the November Alaska Board of Fisheries herring meeting a strong relationship between the magnitude of the offshore interception and the conservation crisis facing Western Alaskan herring fisheries.

Available tagging data demonstrates the presence of herring from throughout Western Alaska in the Bering Sea trawl fisheries managed by the federal government.

In a letter dated Dec. 18, Gary Slavin, Fisheries Board chairman, requests that the North Pacific Fishery Management Council "take emergency action next spring to implement the plan amendment's herring bycatch controls to cover the critical period between July and December 1990 when herring will be migrating through areas fished by the groundfish trawl fleet."

"The board is very concerned about the impact that the bycatch of herring in Bering Sea groundfish trawl fisheries is having on these herring stocks," he said.

Slavin further requests that the council "addresses the herring bycatch problem during the 1990 council regulatory cycle" for implementation in 1991.

Slavin's letter is the first notice by the state since the early 1980s that it was required by a conservation

emergency to intervene in federal management of ocean fisheries in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands.

U.S. boats have had neither observers nor a bycatch cap throughout the 1980s. State Commercial Fisheries Director Ken Parker and biometrician Fritz Fund informed that board that beginning in 1990, boats more than 125 feet long would be required by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service to have 100 percent observer coverage. Thirty percent coverage will be required on boats less than 125 feet in length.

Herring harvest at sea by U.S. boats would be counted for the first time.

Funk reported to the board that at the very minimum, 5,000 herring tons of the eastern Bering Sea herring stock were taken and discarded by U.S. trawl boats in 1989.

Herring are exploited at the 20 percent rate under board management plans throughout the state. Additional harvest by trawlers was not factored in.

Suggestions that the inshore fishery be reduced by 5 percent to account for the offshore interception was rejected by the board at its November meeting.

Slavin wanted the council to know that the crisis would have immediate social impacts on Nelson and Nunivak islands where fisheries are predicted to be closed.

The largest herring fishery in the state was also being affected. Togiak will have a 43 percent decline in harvest. That reduction, Slavin noted, "will reduce the stock abundance to near threshold levels in 1990, below

which a commercial fishery would not be allowed."

To show its good faith in the council process, the board reduced the size of herring taken in the mixed-stock Dutch Harbor food and bait fishery, and delayed the opening of the fishery to reduce its impact on northern Bering Sea herring stocks.

man Don Collinsworth with the following: "The board will be considering a proposal to close waters of the territorial sea to trawling in the Bering Sea during its January meeting as a means of protecting salmon and herring resources.

"Barring any action by the council to address the bycatch of herring, the

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—Gary Slavin

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A stock identification study sponsored by Sen. John Binkley, R-Bethel, collected scale from sac roe and offshore fisheries in 1989. That report will be available by mid-February.

But the state board made the determination not to wait for conclusive scientific evidence. To encourage the council to take prompt action, Slavin closes his letter to North Pacific Fishery Management Council Chair-

board may consider taking action in the territorial waters to compensate for the bycatch in the Bering Sea."

Many of the trawl fisheries take place within the state's waters in an area northwest of Unimak Pass.

The council itself will review Slavin's letter, and state data at its next Anchorage meeting. Public testimony will be begun at the council's Advisory Panel Jan. 14, and by the council itself Jan. 16.