THE ALASKA FishFactor

Covering Alaska's Commercial Fisheries

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Catcher processors could soon boost the state budget by paying a landing tax. That would also serve to squelch one of the biggest grievances against the large vessels which currently operate outside the bounds of tax laws which apply to nearly all other boats both in Alaska and Washington. House Bill 264, which was introduced March 30 by the Rules Committee, would require catcher processors to pay the same 3.3 percent landing tax paid by shorebased operations. Three percent is the standard raw fish tax, with the remainder applied to the Alaska Seafood Marketing Association for generic promotions.

Fisheries advisor Clem Tillion was one of the champions of the landing tax charge. "The factory trawlers came and asked how they could get a fairer shake from the state of Alaska, and I told them if they don't pay, they don't have any say. We don't run the Dept. of Fish and Game on a charity basis. It requires about $50 million a year to keep it running, and those who pay their share have some input," Tillion says.

The landing tax would generate an additional $10 million to the state and local coffers and would put the commercial fishing industry in a position to pay its own way for resource management and enforcement, Tillion adds. By paying the tax, catcher processors could also elminate what they feel are discriminatory attacks they feel are often levied against them, Tillion says.

Rep. Carl Moses, who chairs the House Fisheries Committee was not optimistic HB 264 will be passed by the legislature this year since it was introduced so late in the session. Moses believes it will eventually prevail, though he says opposing forces are already aligned to try and derail the bill.

"The offshore fleet indicated they wouldn't oppose it, but they've hired a full-time lobbyist on a two year contract and I understand they're in the process of selecting an attorney to attack the bill's constitutionality," Moses says. HB 264 was reviewed by the Fisheries Committee April 5. Those representing catcher processors could not be reached for comment.

SITKA'S HERRING SAC ROE SEASON continued last week at a leisurely pace. The season is somewhat unique this year in it's a cross between a competitive and cooperative fishery, with processors setting the pace. Nine processors have been telling fishermen how much herring to catch based on plant capacity. Last year, the entire 5,368 ton quota was taken in less than an hour and a half, which plugged processing plants and caused much of the fish to sit around for days before it could be frozen. By slowing the pace of the harvest, a higher quality product can be guaranteed in the face of a market already oversupplied with product.

Sitka's herring quota of nearly 9,700 tons is the second largest on record. On an upbeat note, the skinny herring that have plagued Sitkans for five years appear to have been replaced by larger fish. The average weight this season is 110 grams with roe counts between 10 and 11 percent.

LOWER YUKON RIVER SALMON FISHERMEN will be cutting back on both subsistence and commercial harvests to help reduce pressure on Toklat River chums, which have failed several times over the past decade to meet escapement goals. The Board of Fisheries in March approved changes to the area's management plan based on fishermen's recommendations.

Over 100 fishermen from 30 villages along a 1,000 miles of the Yukon River met in Emmonak to shape the conservation plan they presented to the Fish Board, in which they agreed to share equally in cutbacks to get more chums to the Toklat. Dan Albrecht, spokesman for the Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association, commended area fishermen for their accomplishment. "It is also in their best interest to take the lead in preserving the Toklat chums, Albrecht adds. "If fishermen didn't come to an agreement about how to conserve that stock, invariably the Fish and Game or the Fish Board would've done the job for them," Albrecht says.

THE UNUSUAL MATING HABITS of the tanner crab will be one focus of Kodiak researchers. They hope to witness the huge stacks of female crabs surrounded by males, which take them off one by one to mate. Three years ago biologists with the National Marine Fisheries Service observed the phenomenon for the first time in a small submarine. Last year, they arrived too late to witness the mating ritual. Catching a repeat performance will be somewhat limited as the researchers will rely on a remotely operated underwater video camera, since funding was not available to rent the sub.

Scientists hope to determine if mating crabs aggregate at the same place in Chiniak Bay each year. As part of a larger study of crab mortality and bycatch in directed pot fisheries, they will also look at how crabs are attracted to crab pots, how they enter and exit the crab pots and how they behave inside. "Some bycatch is generated when crabs are caught and thrown overboard. But another part is caused by 'ghost fishing' by pots which are lost and left on the sea floor and may continue to catch crab," says NMFS biologist Brad Stevens. To date, studies have focused only on pulling up crab pots and counting what's inside, rather than observing crab behavior.

SEA URCHINS COULD provide the lead for new birth control measures for humans. Scientists at the State University of New York at Stony Brook have identified for the first time the protein that allows a sperm to unite with an egg to create a new life. According to science writer Paul Recer, researchers believe their work will provide new understanding about a molecular process essential in sexual reproduction throughout the animal kingdom. "The importance is we have identified the molecule on the surface of the egg that is the guidance system for the sperm" says Dr. William Lennarz. The protein enables the sperm to recognize an egg and fuse to it, which is the first step in forming an organism.

If such a protein can be found on a human egg, scientists may be able to create an antibody that would prevent sperm from fusing with the egg, thereby devising a birth control method which works at the molecular level. Scientists could also use the same knowledge to perhaps solve some problems which prevent couples from having children.