



Pending reauthorization of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act, is intended to help boost the fortunes of small scale fishers and enhance the economies of coastal communities in Alaska among other purposes.

*Photo by Bill Hess/Tundra Times filephoto*

## ***Committee fish bill focuses on conservation***

**by Jeff Richardson**  
***Tundra Times staff***

The national debate on fisheries conservation has shifted to floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, now that a committee has voted to support reauthorization of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act with some substantial changes.

On May 10, the House Resources Committee completed its mark-up of HR 39, a package of amendments to the Magnuson Act, designed to dramatically reduce waste in American fisheries, and prevent overfishing of targeted species.

"In 1993, in the North Pacific groundfish fishery alone, more than 740 million pounds of fish were discarded. This resulted in

the waste of 16 percent of the total catch in that fishery. Much of this waste was of prohibited species," said Rep. Don Young, committee chair. "This included the outright waste of 16.7 million pounds of halibut, nearly 17 million pounds of king and Tanner crab, 372,000 pounds of salmon, and 770,000 pounds of herring. This is an absolute waste

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# Magnuson Act reauthorization . . .

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and must be stopped. If we are to maintain a healthy fishery, we need to aggressively attack this problem."

Although marine conservation groups had hoped for stricter rules to protect fish habitat, they hailed the defeat of several proposals sought by Washington-based factory trawlers and other commercial interests that would have eliminated any habitat protection language. In general, they said the proposed bill is oriented more toward conservation than exploitation.

"By and large (it is) a major step forward for conservation of marine resources and the coastal communities in Alaska that rely on them," said Scott Highleyman of the Alaska Marine Conserva-

tion Council.

Among other features, the draft bill preserves the Community Development Quota program, a program that allocates a percentage of the sale proceeds of Bering Sea pollock (and sablefish?) for rural economic development in western Alaska communities.

Other features of the committee draft include:

- **Bycatch restrictions** - Although conservation groups had sought sharp restrictions on North Pacific bycatch, the regional focus was dropped in favor of new national bycatch standards and a requirement that bycatch be minimized in all American fisheries.

- **Overfishing** - The draft provides what conservationists consider a "good" definition of overfishing and would require the Sec-

retary of Commerce to limit overfishing if regional management councils refuse to do so.

- **Habitat protection** - The staff draft of HR 39 with which the House Resources Committee began its deliberations would have required regional fishery councils to minimize impacts to habitat by fishing vessels, and forced the North Pacific Council to confront the impact of trawl gear on the ocean bottom off Alaska's coast. However, shrimpers from the Gulf of Mexico and factory trawlers from the Pacific Northwest succeeded in eliminating the language and making habitat protection discretionary rather than mandatory, despite the vigorous efforts of Rep. Peter DeFazio, a Democrat from Oregon. DeFazio sharply criticized the discretionary habitat pro-

tection language, taking aim at the sponsor of the amendment, Rep. Billy Tauzin of Louisiana.

"So really this amendment should read that you are in support of habitat protection unless it has an economic impact on those who cause the destruction to habitat," said DeFazio.

- **CDQ program** - Rep. Jack Metcalf, a first-term Republican from Washington state, tried to advance a series of Magnuson amendments on behalf of factory trawlers, including one that would have made the CDQ program permissive but not mandatory. This language was soundly defeated. The committee then went on to rename the program in honor of the late Harold Sparck, a western Alaska fisheries advocate instrumental in creation of the CDQ

program.

- **Regional management councils** - The draft bill also included new language to safeguard against conflicts of interest on the councils, which typically include political leaders, industry representatives and management professionals.

Although the timing is still tentative, the House leadership hopes to schedule a full-chamber vote on the bill in late June. Sources close to the Magnuson deliberations say field hearings and mark-up by a Senate committee on its version of the reauthorization should be complete in July, with a Senate vote before the August recess. House and Senate versions would then be reconciled in a conference committee after the recess.