

Industry eyes subsistence herring

By JEFFREY R. RICHARDSON

The Board of Fisheries has a long agenda when it meets December 4 in Anchorage. One of the most important items on that agenda is the up and coming herring fishery in southwestern Alaska.

At least 20 villages between Bristol Bay and Norton Sound, and a few in Bristol Bay rely on the spring spawning runs of herring to supplement food supplies which are scarce in that season. Last spring, subsistence gillnetters took about 130 metric tons of herring.

It is, as one Bethel resident put it, a classic situation. The villagers of Bristol Bay and Norton Sound want to catch the herring to eat; commercial operators want to harvest the herring not only as a food fish, but also process the herring roe that clings to kelp. What the villagers fear is that a commercial fishery is too early, that not enough is yet known to adequately manage the fishery.

Lending support to these fears, commercial operators last spring exceeded the catch of herring deemed safe by biologists by more than 2,000 metric tons.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game disagrees. Regional Supervisor Ron Regnart maintains that the department has sufficient knowledge to manage the herring, although he admits that population figures and other data could be more complete. The department feels it is important to establish an American herring fishery in the area in order to protect the resource for all American users. Under the federal 200-mile limit law, the United States must allocate any surplus fish to foreign nations. The department feels the herring could best be protected and utilized and managed with a predominantly American fishery.

"We feel that the whole crux of this thing is that if the domestic fishery is closed, it allows the foreign fishermen to make that much more catch," Regnart said.

Although there was a herring fishery in Golovin Bay during the Twenties and Thirties, the market for herring as a food fish declined and it has only been in the last five years that there has been renewed American interest in Bering Sea herring stocks. Until last spring, very modest, almost insignificant, operations were carried on by local commercial operators in the sac roe and spawn on-kelp fisheries. A near-shore Japanese herring fishery, which had been active since 1968, catching an average of 1,000 metric tons, was eliminated by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, which has jurisdiction over foreign fishing off Alaska outside of three miles.

What frustrated the subsistence fishermen of the coastal villages is that the very year the Japanese were cut out, two major American processors, one from Kodiak and one from Petersburg, dipped their

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nets into the near-shore waters and sailed away with 3,200 metric tons of herring.

Although Fish and Game asserts that any danger to Bering Sea herring now comes from a destructive Japanese offshore trawl fishery, the Eskimos of Bristol Bay and Norton Sound are most fearful of commercial operations wreaking havoc with spawning stocks found close to shore in the spring. The commercial catch of spawning stock increased 220 percent this year and observers have predicted a catch in the neighborhood of 10,000 metric tons for 1978.

Although people in Bristol Bay are interested in entering the commercial herring fishery themselves and do not rely heavily on herring as food fish, they are sympathetic to conflicts with subsistence users in their region and further north. The Bethel-based environmental group, Nunam Kitlutsisti, wants the whole coastline from the north end of Bristol Bay to the southern end of Norton Sound closed to commercial herring fishing. The group also advocates that the Total Allowable Catch of herring for the whole eastern Bering Sea be reduced from 21,000 metric tons to 12,000 metric tons until studies are completed to determine what the distri-

bution of spawning stocks in the area actually is.

Only part of the subsistence battle has been won, according to Harold Sparck of Nunam Kitlutsisti:

"One of the benefits we've gotten is that a tremendous amount of money is going to be spent in the next three years (for herring research). We've won that issue."

But issues and questions remain unresolved. Sparck said Native subsistence fishermen do not buy Fish and Game's urgent insistence that American commercial fishermen must assert their right to harvest the resource; Sparck sees protection of the resource from domestic and foreign exploitation to insure village food supplies as more important. And there just is not enough information in yet to provide that protection.

Although the Department of Fish and Game will offer a proposed regulation to the Board of Fisheries that would close down part of the coastline between Bristol Bay and Norton Sound, it is a substantially smaller area than the Natives are asking for.

And the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, which has responded to the subsistence fishermen's pleas for more research, has set the Total Allowable Catch of herring in the Bering Sea at 18,000 metric tons, much higher than requested by the villagers.

And although the Department of Fish and Game has drafted regulations that would support the desire of Bristol Bay commercial fishermen to get into herring, there is no guarantee that the Board of Fisheries will buy the proposals. In order to compete with better organized and equipped operators from outside the region, Bristol Bay fishermen want purse seiners to be eliminated in favor of gill-nets, a ban on the use of spotter aircraft and several days of commercial closure to allow subsistence fishermen to take a portion of the quota.

There is evidence that fishing industry politics and pressures will play a significant role in herring decisions that will be made by the fisheries board next week. Subsistence fishermen are attempting to organize well enough to hold their own against outside entrepreneurs who may, in the rush for profit, make it impossible for the villagers to maintain their relatively tiny catch.