

THE ALASKA FishFactor

Covering
Alaska's
Commercial Fisheries

By Laine Welch

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KODIAK - - It's nearing the busiest time of the year for limited entry permit brokers, as commercial fishermen wanting to make transfers rush to close their deals before the start-up of this year's seasons. But while there's lots of trading activity, it's taken a potentially troublesome twist. "Instead of buyers meeting the seller's asking price, in many cases the sellers are coming back and chasing the buyer's offers," says John Mitchell of Western Alaska Brokerage in Anchorage.

In what used to be considered "normal" times, there would be a five percent turnover rate on Alaska limited entry permits for any fishery in a calendar year. Mitchell says it is not the scenario this trading season. "You can't beg, borrow or steal a False Pass drift permit now, and resistance has shown up for Cook Inlet drifts. Although there's a squad of buyers willing to pay \$90,000 there, sellers aren't going to let their permits go for that," he added.

Bristol Bay drift permits dropped six percentage points since last fall and are trading for around \$210,000. "That's not too bad, but that's the benchmark, and it doesn't make the major moves," Mitchell explains. Kodiak salmon seine permits that were bringing \$120,000 last year are down to around \$65,000. Prince William Sound seine permits which fetched \$300,000 two years ago are "trading light" at \$90,000. "Some of your herring permits have gone right through the floor," says the broker.

It's too soon to predict trends

in the limited entry permit market but conditions are definitely changing, Mitchell says. "A lot of people are having second thoughts, and there's lots of confusion in the market. It's not a question of whether or not there will be an adjustment in the value of permits, the question is how much," he says.

THE EXPECTED ARRIVAL of a MEGA-MASS of HERRING has the industry doing the hustle to find creative management solutions before the surge of fish arrives in April. Up to 82,000 tons of sac roe herring could be harvested statewide, well above last year's record catch of 62,000 tons.

The huge run will add pressure to a world market already awash with herring. Alaskan products will have to compete with bumper catches from Canada, California, and Northern Europe. To make matters worse, nearly 20,000 metric tons on inventory including roe remains unsold in Japan, which is the final destination for all of Alaska's sac roe herring. "There's a fairly good chance the value of the product is going to be substantially less than what it's been in recent years," says State Fish and Game Commissioner Carl Rosier at an industry-wide meeting last week in Anchorage.

Herring processors, who are worried about handling the large volumes of fish, suggested the State manage herring fisheries according to amounts that can be processed in a three day period. Others also recommended lower harvest quotas, and bringing in foreign processors. By law, Fish and Game cannot manage a fishery ac-

cording to market conditions, and Rosier says management throughout the state will remain pretty much the same, although shorter openings in smaller areas may be considered. "We'll manage with more emphasis on the quality of the product," Rosier says.

This year's sac roe herring scenario is likely to be especially painful for fishermen in Norton Sound, an area which derives nearly 85 percent of its annual income from herring. Last year, Norton Sound lost its herring season completely when the late pack lingered into June and forced processors and buyers to look elsewhere.

CRABBERS IN SOUTHEAST made short work of their tanner season, taking just 13 days to catch an estimated 1.5 million pounds of bairdi Tanner crab. Although the catch is below the 2 million pound quota, Fish and Game closed the fishery a little early to compensate for a higher harvest last year.

Biologists were optimistic about the overall health of the Southeast stocks, although it's better in some places than others. While initial catch rates of legal sized crab are lower, there are encouraging signs of young crab coming into the fishery. "There's a significant enough number of recruits so the population appears to be in good health. Until we get another strong year class, we'll be harvesting in the same range as this year," says crab biologist Tim Koeneman. Tanner crab prices in Southeast Alaska were reported at \$1.65 a pound, down from last year's \$2.25 a pound.

BERING SEA POLLOCK trawlers pulled in their nets for a final time Feb. 22 after reach-

ing their winter catch quota in one month. The big at-sea processing vessels are allowed 1.3 million metric tons of pollock for harvest this year, (286 million pounds.) The catch is split 45/55 percent between the winter and summer season, which begins in mid-August. While catches were said to be good, reports from the Bering Sea fleet said the pollock were running small again this year, and roe quality was not as good as it should be.

Meanwhile, Bering Sea crabbers continued to haul up some hefty catches. Processors were still keeping pace with up to 20 million pounds of crab a week since the season started in mid-January. The combined snow crab (*opilio*) harvest topped 140 million pounds by late Feb., out of a quota of 207 million pounds. Opies were bringing 65 cents a pound, up from 50 cents last year.

COURSES IN SAFETY and survival are coming soon to a community near you. The Alaska Marine Safety Education Association (AMSEA) is providing port-based training for fishermen throughout the state, thanks to funding provided by the Coast Guard and Alaska Sea Grant. The 18 hour course included fire-fighting, on board drills, Coast Guard evacuations, survival equipment and more. Finishing the course satisfies a federal requirement going into effect Sept. 1994 that one person aboard documented vessels fishing beyond boundary lines be trained in emergency survival. The cost is under \$100. Call AMSEA at 800-770-3288. (Ellen Lockyer, Anchorage and Kerry Beebe, Petersburg contributed to this column.)