

Trawler bycatch must be reduced

by John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — It's time for the state of Alaska to take a strong position and a leadership role in reducing the bycatch of herring and other species taken by U.S. trawlers working in North Pacific waters.

In the Bering Sea, fisheries scientists estimate these boats are taking up to 15,000 tons of herring each year along with the groundfish they're targeting on. Although the trawlers are prohibited by law from selling the herring and must discard them, virtually all the by-caught herring die even if they're promptly returned to the water.

Alaskans — particularly the residents of Nelson and Nunivak Islands — have been patiently waiting for the state of Alaska and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council to do something about this problem; only to be rewarded with inattention that borders on malicious mismanagement.

The herring being wasted by the trawl fleet are an important part of both the subsistence and commercial economies of these two islands. And while stocks have crashed to the point that the herring fishery was cancelled in the area this year and people had trouble fulfilling their subsistence needs, the trawl fleet fishes on.

It's hard to believe the state of Alaska and the council would be so insensitive to a problem of such magnitude if these fish were being taken by a foreign fleet. In fact, the council did respond aggressively in the 1970s, when Japanese boats were cutting deeply into herring stocks. Under the then newly enacted 200-mile act, the council quickly moved to ban Japanese boats from the gillnetting of herring.

But although it cracked down on the Japanese fleet, both the state and the council have never seemed to be able to get equally excited over the depletion of the same herring stocks by U.S. boats.

The state watched these events from the sidelines, never taking on the U.S. trawl fleet over the herring interception. And even after losing a federal lawsuit over its 1980 decision to allow herring to be taken by offshore boats, the council has consistently failed to provide any serious protection to those who most rely on these herring stocks.

To the people of these islands, it really doesn't matter whether their critical fish stocks are being depleted by foreign or American fishermen. They just hope that the state will firmly tell the council to do something to help them, such as placing a cap on the bycatch and instituting a requirement forcing the boats to leave the area once the cap is reached.

To support the action we are requesting of the council, the state must do its part by providing numbers that tell the council what the herring bycatch cap should be. Without numbers, the state has been unable in the past to back up its position before the council and, as a result, has backed down.

Further, we cannot afford to wait for the larger stocks, like the Togiak stock, to be devastated before we do something with the groundfish trawl fleet. The health of the smaller Nunivak Island and Nelson Island stock should be the controlling factor, not just the health of the larger Togiak stock.

The council is scheduled to meet

again in Anchorage next week and will consider a proposal that offers a herring bycatch cap and other alternatives, including doing nothing.

The state's position on protecting the Nelson Island stocks is still unknown at this time. Trawl industry officials have made it clear they will vigorously fight this and any other measure that has the potential to reduce their fishing effort in the North Pacific, regardless of the consequences to local fishermen.

Trawl industry opposition undoubtedly was a major reason the state and the council chose to ignore a legislative resolution I sponsored this past session asking for emergency measures to reduce the herring bycatch, but the issue is going to get harder and harder to put aside.

Yukon-Kuskokwim fishermen also want help with the impact that bycatch is having on their salmon runs, and Kenai Peninsula sport and commercial fishermen have asked the council to put controls on the bycatch in order to prevent further reductions in returns of highly prized king salmon to the Kenai River.

These are all different fisheries, but the fishermen who work them share the common problems of having their traditional stocks intercepted by trawlers as an incidental catch.

The state has an obligation to provide for the conservation of these stocks taken by in-shore fishermen. The council has an obligation to protect these stocks — and the livelihoods of these fishermen — as an important part of their management of commercial fisheries of the North Pacific.

I hope the state's delegation and the council's members will take an important step toward fulfilling that obligation in the upcoming meeting, because Alaska's fishermen, particularly the people of Nelson Island and Nunivak Island whose herring resources are devastated, can't afford to be patient any longer.



OPINION

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