

Commentary

State needs Gulf groundfish plan

by Kadashan

"Groundfish Fisheries off Alaska are largely managed by the federal government through the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service," says a report prepared for the Peninsula Marketing Association. This report was made available following a conference organized by Peninsula Marketing Association and the Aleutians East Borough with grant funds from the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development. The conference was specifically for local fishermen and was held in Anchorage in April.

Indeed, the State of Alaska *has* succumbed to federal management and now realizes that if it doesn't develop a groundfish fisheries management plan for state waters, Alaskans will continue to lose the battle of cultivating their communities economically, particularly the way Individual Fishing Quotas (IFQ's) and Community Development Quotas (CDQ's) are affecting smaller operators.

Crucial to the economic well being of coastal communities along the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) is perceptive management of all fisheries — a management plan that will benefit commercial fishermen

in these communities rather than the large fishing vessels that come from out-of-state. These larger fleets have the capability of meeting a quota in a matter of days. At the two day meeting participants brainstormed ways in which the state can manage a groundfish fishery that will spread the seasons longer into the fall and winter months.

IFQ's are affecting the halibut and cod fisheries adversely in some smaller communities. Many are unhappy with the amount of poundage translated from their unit measures awarded them this year. Fishermen in one community thought it outrageous when one of their colleagues received 45 pounds for the year. If that was outrageous, it was downright insulting when another fisherman from another community received only 9 pounds! Although the freedom fishers have to fish whenever they want is an insightful concept; many fishermen who have been engaged in groundfish fishing most of their lives in the coastal communities on the GOA feel they are being shortchanged. The inequity of the plan is that it does not display the real capability of some who receive so little poundage this year.

Although Community Development Quotas might have worked well for communities in

the Bering Sea, many realize it may not be so in other parts of Alaska. Like IFQ's, CDQ's can be sold and one major concern was that communities from the east coast can, and will, buy out the Alaska CDQ's, leaving our own communities dry and suffering economically. Although some communities, like Yakutat, were thinking of getting involved in CDQ's, minds might be changing if ways cannot be devised on how it can truly benefit the small operator and communities.

Some recommendations that came from the conference were, indeed, discerning ones. Vessels over 58' will not be included from the start of the plan. Those over 58' who have been in the fishery can be grandfathered in, however. Seasons will be from early fall into the winter. Gear type will include pots, jigging machines, longline, troll. Jigging will be promoted as a new viable gear type, whereas longline will be discouraged because of the large by-catch. Troll is included because some fishers from the Yakutat area have been winter trolling for rock fish. Pots are favored because they have no by-catch. Processors like pots because the fish can be kept alive and provided fresh to the market.

Southeast Alaska has a pretty

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well established management plan for groundfish, so the portion of the GOA covered at this conference was from Yakutat to Akutan. The Peninsula Marketing report notes that the Bering Sea does not require a state plan because "there is little biological distinction between resources within 0-3 and 3-200 miles offshore" and that there are very few communities that are utilizing nearshore groundfish re-

sources. Besides, they have their CDQ programs for pollock, halibut, sablefish, etc. The concentration at the meeting was on communities who are "fishery dependent but are sometimes preempted from local groundfish fishing opportunities by larger more mobile fleets."

The plan will also provide for adequate surveys and inventories of species in various areas. This means that a biologist will have to

be placed in each area to assess available biomass and establish quotas. This information should be separate from "federal quotas offshore," the report says. Even though there may be overlaps of proposed harvests between state and federal jurisdiction, the state harvest should be above and beyond those allowed in the federal guidelines. Overlaps should be closely monitored and state harvests will take precedence over fed-

eral TACs, the report recommends.

This conference was worthwhile and long over-due. It was worthwhile because it offered fishers from across the GOA a chance to share points of view on how a state managed groundfish fisheries should be designed to profit the central and western Gulf of Alaska - that is, to come up with a solid set of guidelines to recommend to the State of Alaska. It was made clear at the outset that the State of Alaska has a limited amount of funds invested in a groundfish management plan at present, and that there is no money available to put a future plan into operation. However, the conference participants were encouraged

not to let this discourage their efforts to put forth a plan that would benefit themselves. Once a plan has been developed, then it will be up to the legislature to fund it. The goal for this special meeting was to assure that the State of Alaska has a plan in place by 1996 - a plan that would provide for entry-level groundfish fisheries within state waters. What with the way the feds have dominated the groundfish fisheries, this domination has limited the access of coastal communities. It is time the State of Alaska take the initiative here and provide for the economic destiny of communities that are fishery dependent. This conference did that.