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## Dunleavy creates task force to study bycatch

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Nov 29, 2021



Crew members shovel pollock on the deck of a Bering Sea trawler last year. Nathaniel Herz/Alaska's Energy Desk

Bycatch, or seafood that is caught but cannot be sold, is one of the most complicated issues in Alaska's fisheries. There is a lot of debate over what can or should be done about it, or if it's even a problem. Earlier this month, Gov. Mike Dunleavy created the Alaska Bycatch Review Task Force to answer some of these questions.

“It’s imperative that the state’s fisheries are managed in a way that ensures their success for future generations,” Dunleavy said in a news release. “By bringing together stakeholders, to include sport and commercial fishermen, federal and state fisheries managers, lawmakers, and the general public, this task force will provide valuable recommendations to help better understand and address the issues of bycatch.”

Critics have questioned whether or not the task force is necessary. Kodiak-based fisherman Theresa Peterson, fisheries policy director for the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, is torn on the idea.

“I believe the current administration (already) has the tools to address and minimize bycatch of species important to Alaskans if they choose to represent Alaskans,” Peterson said.

### The bycatch sprawl

Bycatch exists in all types of fisheries, including commercial sport and subsistence, but most of the discussion about bycatch centers around trawlers. Trawlers have the most bycatch, by far. Trawlers caught 92 million pounds of bycatch in 2020, according to a presentation Alaska Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Doug Vincent-Lang made to the Alaska State House of Representatives Fisheries Committee earlier this month. In comparison, pot gear fishermen caught 3.3 million pounds of bycatch, and hook and line fishermen caught 38.5 million pounds that year.

“While it may be true that these types of choices (that address bycatch) will potentially result in less harvest opportunities to trawlers who have bycatch issues, the state has the power now to stand up to Alaskans now without a task force,” Peterson said.

There are concerns that bycatch depletes salmon populations before they return to the rivers where they lay eggs. This summer, subsistence salmon fishing along the Yukon River was cancelled, because of low populations of Chinook and chum salmon. One theory to explain the population crash is bycatch, but that is hard to prove.

“[Bycatch] obviously is a big issue because of the tremendous numbers [of salmon] that are being taken, especially king salmon (Chinook) and chum,” Patrick Holmes, a member of the Kodiak/Aleutians Subsistence Advisory Council said. “It seems to be quite a point of passion on both sides, both from a salmon side and a trawler side, on interceptions of Chinook and chum salmon ... but it’s complicated.”

There are many factors that impact lower fish stock, including climate change, which causes populations to move into different locations and may impact the size and health of a species being harvested.

This year, there was a massive crash of the red king crab and snow crab stock in the Bering Sea. One theory proposed to explain the cause is as waters get warmer, crabs are moving further north, out of these areas.

### Addressing the issues

Some people don’t think bycatch is a problem at all.

“I don’t see where the issue is except to say — to be fair to the public — you’re getting a lot of changes in the ecosystem that are affecting certain direct fisheries,” Julie Bonney, executive director of the Alaska Groundfish Data Bank, said. “People are panicking because their resources are collapsing. They don’t know how to fix it [so they blame bycatch] when in reality, if you shut down all the fisheries ... you won’t fix the problems.”

Bonney thinks the task force might be a good thing. The task force can come up with ways to respond to problem that are often attributed to bycatch, she said.

Rebecca Skinner, executive director of the Alaska Whitefish Trawlers Association, also thinks the task force has the potential to serve Alaska, but she’s unsure about what the task force will be doing. The actual guidelines for the task force are vague, she said.

In the administrative order to create this task force, Dunleavy stated that the task force will study the impacts of bycatch on fisheries; evaluate and recommend policies informed by understanding the issue of bycatch in high-value Alaska fishery resources; ensure state agencies

are leveraging resources to better understand the issues of bycatch; and use the best available science to inform policymakers and the public about the issues.

The administration has not issued any followup statement elaborating on the role of the task force.

“Hopefully, early on the task force will come up with a clearly stated goal and approach,” Skinner said. “Then create an opportunity for additional stakeholders [who are not members of the task force] to be involved.”

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