

One-Page Issue Summary: Bristol Bay 32-Foot Vessel Length Limitation

Issue Overview

The Bristol Bay salmon drift gillnet fishery is governed by a 32-foot vessel overall length limitation under **5 AAC 06.341**. This rule, originally established in 1949 and last substantively defined in 1991, was intended to limit vessel size, maintain fleet equity, and restrict structural advantages. While certain items are excluded from the measurement (anchor rollers, fish drop-out baskets, gillnet rollers, trim tabs, outdrives, outdrive guards), these exclusions were meant for necessary gear only, not to provide flotation, hull extension, or additional working space.

The “Race for Fish” in Bristol Bay is tempered by the 32-foot vessel overall length limitation. Without it or with a greater length limit, the disparity between vessels will grow larger, creating an even greater disparity between watershed residents and those who live outside the area.

A 2003 report titled “AN ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS TO RESTRUCTURE THE BRISTOL BAY SALMON FISHERY” which was prepared for BBEDC and the Joint Legislative Salmon Task Force highlighted the reasons to keep the 32-foot vessel length unchanged.

[Bristol Bay Salmon Restructuring Study Final Report](#)

[Bristol Bay Salmon Restructuring Study Flyer](#)

There have been two BOF findings on the 32-foot vessel length. The first, in 1981 (81-92FB), and the second, in 2019 (2019-295-FB), both underscore the importance of maintaining the 32-foot vessel length.

Key Problems Identified

AWT field measurements and enforcement experience indicate widespread deviations that are not allowed by regulation, including:

- **Oversized or extended anchor rollers** longer, taller, or wider than the allowed 8 inches.
- **Fish drop-out baskets** made from sealed aluminum tubing that provide flotation, contrary to definition.
- **Gillnet roller support structures** built off the stern, effectively extending the hull and expanding deck work area.
- **Outdrive mounting boxes and hull extensions** (sometimes several feet long) that add flotation or planing surface, violating regulations unless within an 18-inch trim tab.
- **Outdrive guards** constructed from airtight tubing or fitted with decking, providing flotation or platform space despite the requirement for skeletal, non-functional design.

- **Trim tabs** exceeding 18 inches or designed as enclosed, buoyant extensions of the hull.
- **Additional unregulated appendages** on bows or transoms that extend beyond 32 feet and fall outside the defined exceptions.

These modifications undermine the current regulations and create inequities and disparities among the fleet.

Legal Interpretation of When the 32' Limit Applies

A 2025 legal memorandum analyzing **5 AAC 06.341** and **5 AAC 39.120** concludes the following

- **The 32-foot limit applies to any vessel registered for Bristol Bay salmon net fishing**, based on CFEC area registration—not whether the vessel is actively fishing.
- **The rule applies year-round**, regardless of vessel status or location. This includes vessels that are:
 - Actively fishing
 - Moored
 - Hauled out
 - Under construction or modification
 - In a shipyard
- **AWT is authorized to measure vessels anywhere** and may issue citations or initiate action affecting a vessel's salmon net registration if the vessel exceeds the 32-foot limit at any time during the registration year.

This interpretation clearly shows when and where compliance matters and reinforces the need for clear and enhanced enforcement practices.

Enforcement of the Current Regulation is the Preferred Path Forward

- **AWT** needs sufficient capacity to enforce the current 32-foot regulation
 - **Enforcement is becoming more complex.** Modern appendages blur the line between allowed gear and prohibited hull extensions, requiring greater AWT resources
 - **Fleet equity is eroding.** Operators who comply with the current regulation are at a disadvantage.
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MEMORANDUM

To: Anthony Zoch; Jeff Regnart
From: Duncan R. McIntosh
Date: September 26, 2025
Re: 32-Foot Overall Length Limitation on Bristol Bay Salmon Net Fishing Vessels

I. Introduction:

There is broad recognition that the 32-foot vessel overall length limitation on Bristol Bay salmon gillnet vessels is being exceeded by some vessels.¹ There is seemingly less certainty, however, regarding precisely when that vessel length restriction applies. This memorandum examines that question, and concludes that the length limitation applies to, and is enforceable against, any vessel that holds a CFEC Commercial Vessel License with a Bristol Bay Salmon Net Area registration. As such, the vessel length limitation applies irrespective of where a vessel is located – at sea, at the dock, or in the shipyard – and whether or not it is engaged in fishing at the time. For that reason, the Alaska Wildlife Troopers could measure drift gillnet vessels in the shipyard and, based on those measurements, issue citations to vessels that exceed the maximum permitted length.

II. Analysis:

The 32-foot overall length limitation on Bristol Bay drift gillnet vessels is imposed by 5 AAC 06.341. It provides that, “No vessel *registered for salmon net fishing* may be more than 32 feet in overall length.”² As such, by the plain language of the regulation, the length limitation applies if and when a vessel is registered for salmon net fishing in Bristol Bay.

5 AAC 06.341 contains a series of definitions, which helpfully clarify the meaning of the length limitation. The phrase “registered for salmon net fishing” is not

¹ See for instance the February 14, 2023, letter from Colonel Bernard Chastain, then Director of the Alaska Wildlife Troopers, to all Bristol Bay Commercial Salmon Drift Gillnet Permit holders.

² A copy of the entirety of 5 AAC 06.341 is attached as Exhibit A.

defined. However, that is understandable as this term really affords no opportunity for confusion; a vessel is registered for salmon net fishing at the time of and as part of application for a Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (“CFEC”) Commercial Vessel License, as contemplated by 5 AAC 39.120(c),³ which provides in relevant part:

(c) Area registration requirements for salmon net fishing vessels are as follows:

(1) a person who owns a fishing vessel to be used to take salmon with net gear, or his authorized agent, shall register for an area by designating on the vessel license application or renewal form the vessel’s one area of intended salmon net gear operation for the year; it is unlawful for a vessel to engage in salmon net fishing in an area other than the single area selected;

For purposes of disambiguation – just in case that is necessary – while 5 AAC 39.120(a) requires that all commercial fishing vessels “register” with the CFEC before taking fish in Alaskan waters, that requirement applies to all commercial fishing vessels – it is not salmon specific – and is therefore clearly not the “registering for salmon net fishing” that is intended by 5 AAC 06.341. Similarly, 5 AAC 06.370 requires all Bristol Bay salmon drift gillnetters to “register” for a Bristol Bay district (e.g., Togiak, etc.), but this is a Bristol Bay subarea/district registration, not a registration for salmon net fishing generally, and is similarly not what is intended. “Registered for salmon net fishing” as used in 5 AAC 06.341 means registering for a salmon net area as contemplated by 5 AAC 39.120(c).

The wording of 5 AAC 06.341 means that the 32-foot overall length limitation is enforceable against any vessel with a CFEC Commercial Vessel License that includes a Salmon Net Area registration for Bristol Bay for the applicable year. There is nothing in the regulation that suggests that a vessel needs to be actively fishing in order for the limitation to apply. Of course, if that had been the intention, it would be easy to phrase the regulation that way – as a prohibition applicable only to vessels actively engaged in (and not merely registered for) salmon net fishing in Bristol Bay. For instance, it could have said, “No vessel that exceeds 32 feet in overall length may engage in salmon net fishing,” or “No vessel may take salmon with a net if in excess of 32 feet in overall length.” You do not have to look far to find regulations structured that way; see e.g., 5 AAC 06.331(f) (“A person may not operate more than two set gillnets”). But 5 AAC 06.341 is not worded that way. There is no ambiguity in the regulation, and no reason to impute a limitation to vessels that are actively fishing.

³ A copy of the entire regulation is attached as Exhibit B.

Because the length limitation applies to any vessel registered for salmon net fishing in the Bristol Bay area, 5 AAC 06.341 permits the measurement of such vessels by Alaska Wildlife Troopers whether fishing or not, at sea or not, or in the shipyards; and it permits the issuance of citations for infractions (or, presumably, the revocation of the Salmon Net Area registration) for vessels that exceed 32-feet in overall length under those same circumstances. We can find no limitation on that authority, and we see no basis on which to impute any.

III. Conclusion:

The 32-foot overall length limitation applies to any vessel registered for salmon net fishing in Bristol Bay. It applies, and could be enforced, against any such vessel, whether fishing or not, in the shipyard or at sea, if registered for salmon net fishing for the then current calendar year.

5 Alaska Admin. Code 06.341

Current through Register 254 (July, 2025).

Alaska Administrative Code > **Title 5. Fish and Game** > **Part 1.**
Commercial and Subsistence Fishing and Private Nonprofit Salmon and Shellfish Hatcheries.
> **Chapter 06. Bristol Bay Area.** > **Article 3. Salmon Fishery.**

5 AAC 06.341. Vessel specifications and operations.

(a) No vessel registered for salmon net fishing may be more than 32 feet in overall length. An anchor roller may not extend more than eight inches beyond the 32-foot overall length, and any portion that extends beyond the 32-foot overall length may not be more than eight inches in width or height.

(b) For the purposes of this section,

- (1) “anchor roller” means a device used solely in aid of deploying and retrieving anchor gear, and does not provide any additional flotation, planing surface, or structural support to the vessel;
- (2) “fish drop-out basket” means a device used solely to prevent the loss of fish from a gillnet after the fish leaves the water and before it is brought on board the vessel; a “fish drop-out basket” does not provide any additional flotation, planing surface, or structural support to the vessel;
- (3) “gillnet roller” means a device used solely in aid of deploying and retrieving drift gillnet gear; a “gillnet roller” does not provide any additional flotation or planing surface to the vessel;
- (4) “outdrive” means part of the propulsion system of a vessel used for either steering or thrust; an “outdrive” does not provide any additional flotation or planing surface to the vessel;
- (5) “outdrive guard” means a device of skeletal construction used solely to protect the outdrive unit of a vessel; an “outdrive guard” does not provide any additional flotation or planing surface and is not used for any other purpose such as a bench, platform, or storage area;
- (6) “overall length” means the straight-line measurement between the extremities of the vessel, but does not include fish drop-out baskets, anchor rollers, gillnet rollers, trim tabs, outdrives, or outdrive guards;
- (7) “trim tabs” means an extension of the bottom of a vessel, at the transom, which is no more than 18 inches long at its longest point; “trim tabs” do not provide any increased flotation, and their sole function is to provide trim to a vessel while underway.

Statutory Authority

Authority: AS 16.05.251

History

(In effect before 1981; am 6/28/81, Register 78; am 6/10/90, Register 114; am 5/14/98, Register 146)

Alaska Administrative Code
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[5 Alaska Admin. Code 39.120](#)

Current through Register 254 (July, 2025).

Alaska Administrative Code > **Title 5. Fish and Game** > **Part 1.**
Commercial and Subsistence Fishing and Private Nonprofit Salmon and Shellfish Hatcheries.
> **Chapter 39. General Provisions.** > **Article 1. General.**

5 AAC 39.120. Registration of commercial fishing vessels.

(a) A person who owns a commercial fishing vessel or that person's authorized agent shall register that vessel by completing a vessel license application or renewal form and submitting it to the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, unless the vessel is not required to be licensed under AS 16.05.495. Vessel registration is required before fishing or transporting unprocessed fish in any waters of Alaska. A vessel, if it is in compliance with all regulations governing registration and if it displays a license issued under AS 16.05.530, unless the vessel is not required to be licensed under AS 16.05.495, is considered to be registered under the laws of the state and may take or transport unprocessed fish. It is unlawful to take, attempt to take, or possess unprocessed fish aboard a vessel in the waters of Alaska unless the vessel is registered under the laws of the state. For purposes of this subsection,

(1) "employ," as used in AS 16.05.475, means taking or attempting to take fish, or transporting fish which have been taken or any operation of a vessel aiding or assisting in the taking or transporting of unprocessed fish;

(2) "in compliance with all regulations governing registration" includes vessel registration required by [5 AAC 28.020](#), [5 AAC 31.020](#), [5 AAC 31.030](#), [5 AAC 32.020](#), [5 AAC 32.030](#), [5 AAC 34.020](#), [5 AAC 34.030](#), [5 AAC 35.020](#), [5 AAC 35.030](#), [5 AAC 38.020](#), and 5 AAC 38.030, and includes district or subdistrict registration requirements of 5 AAC 03 — 5 AAC 38, and includes the provisions of this section;

(3) "registered under the laws of the state" means that a vessel displays a license described in [20 AAC 05.1958](#) and issued under AS 16.05.530, unless the vessel is not required to be licensed under AS 16.05.495, and that the registration provisions of 5 AAC 03 — 5 AAC 39 have been complied with and evidence of compliance is immediately available at all times during fishing or transporting operations, and can be shown upon request to an authorized representative of the department.

(b) Area registration requirements for shellfish vessels are as specified in the registration regulations in 5 AAC 31 — 5 AAC 38.

(c) Area registration requirements for salmon net fishing vessels are as follows:

(1) a person who owns a fishing vessel to be used to take salmon with net gear, or his authorized agent, shall register for an area by designating on the vessel license application or renewal form the vessel's one area of intended salmon net gear operation for the year; it is unlawful for a vessel to engage in salmon net fishing in an area other than the single area selected;

(2) in this section the term "area" means any registration area listed in (d) of this section, except that

(A) in salmon net Registration Area T, a vessel must also be registered by the department for a fishing district as required by [5 AAC 06.370](#);

(B) in salmon net Registration Area Y, a vessel must also be registered by the department for a fishing district as required by [5 AAC 05.370](#);

(C) a purse seine vessel registered for salmon net Registration Area M is also registered to operate purse seine gear in Registration Area F during the same registration year;

(3) a vessel registered for an area of salmon net fishing in compliance with (c)(1) of this section will be issued, by the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, a vessel license area tab for that year; it is unlawful for a vessel to fish in the area of registration unless the vessel displays the area tab on the vessel license number plate; no vessel owner or operator may possess for each vessel, or no vessel may display, more than one vessel license area tab;

(4) a person who owns a fishing vessel registered for an area of intended operation in compliance with (c)(1) of this section or his authorized agent may register it for a different salmon net registration area under the following conditions:

(A) the reregistration of a salmon net fishing vessel shall be authorized by the

(i) commissioner upon receipt of proof in writing that the vessel has been lost through sinking, destruction, or extensive mechanical breakdown, or that the vessel operator has suffered serious injury, sickness or death during the open season; or

(ii) Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission upon receipt of a written certification or personal affidavit stating that the vessel has not been used for salmon net fishing in the original area of registration during the current registration year;

(B) a person authorized to reregister a vessel must complete a reregistration form issued by the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission and submit it to the commissioner together with any previously issued vessel license area tab;

(C) it is unlawful for a vessel to fish in the area of reregistration unless the vessel displays the appropriate area tab on the vessel license number plate;

(D) area reregistration under this section shall supersede the original area registration as if the original area registration had never been made;

(E) once a vessel has reregistered for another net registration area to replace a lost vessel, that vessel can not transfer back to its original net registration area during that season;

(5) repealed 4/16/83.

(d) Salmon net gear registration areas are as follows:

Code Letter	Area
A	Southeastern Alaska Area (5 AAC 33.100)
D	Yakutat Area (5 AAC 30.100)
E	Prince William Sound Area (5 AAC 24.100) and the Yakataga District of the Yakutat Area (5 AAC 30.200(a))
F	Atka-Amlia Islands Area (5 AAC 11.101)
H	Cook Inlet Area (5 AAC 21.100)
K	Kodiak Area (5 AAC 18.100)
L	Chignik Area (5 AAC 15.100)
M	Aleutian Islands and Alaska Peninsula Areas (5 AAC 12.100 and 5 AAC 09.100) and, from August

5 Alaska Admin. Code 39.120

1 through August 31, the Atka-Amlia Islands Area ([5 AAC 11.101](#)) for purse seine gear only

T — Bristol Bay Area ([5 AAC 06.100](#)) and January 1 through December 31, the Cinder River and Inner Port Heiden Sections of the Alaska Peninsula Area and August 1 through December 31, that portion of the Ilnik Section within Ilnik Lagoon and all waters inside the Seal Islands of the Alaska Peninsula Area ([5 AAC 09.200\(a\)\(1\)](#) — (3))

W — Kuskokwim Area ([5 AAC 07.100](#))

X — Arctic-Kotzebue Area ([5 AAC 03.100](#))

Y — Yukon Area ([5 AAC 05.100](#))

Z — Norton Sound-Port Clarence Area ([5 AAC 04.100](#))

(e) Evidence of proper registration or licensing must be kept immediately available at all times during fishing operations and must be shown upon request to any peace officer of the state.

(f) The provisions of this section do not apply to halibut fishing.

(g) Repealed 10/1/98.

Statutory Authority

Authority: AS 16.05.251 AS 16.05.475

History

(In effect before 1982; am 4/14/82, Register 82; am 4/16/83, Register 86; am 4/28/84, Register 90; am 5/31/85, Register 94; am 6/25/89, Register 110; am 5/13/92, Register 122; am 5/28/92, Register 122; am 7/16/92, Register 123; am 5/17/95, Register 134; am 6/2/95, Register 134; am 6/2/96, Register 138; am 6/28/97, Register 142; am 5/8/98, Register 146; am 5/31/98, Register 146; am 10/1/98, Register 147; am 7/13/2012, Register 203; am 6/1/2013, Register 206; add'l am 6/1/2013, Register 206)

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THE STATE
of **ALASKA**
GOVERNOR MIKE DUNLEAVY

Department of Public Safety

DIVISION OF ALASKA WILDLIFE TROOPERS
Office of the Director

5700 East Tudor Road
Anchorage, Alaska 99507-1225
Main: 907.269.5509

February 14, 2023

Bristol Bay Commercial Salmon Drift Gillnet Permit Holders,

The Alaska Wildlife Troopers are aware of the increasing concern fishermen have regarding drift gillnet vessel lengths in the Bristol Bay Salmon Fishery. AWT has inspected multiple vessels post-season and have noted several areas of concern regarding overall length in the fleet.

The Bristol Bay vessel specifications are described in 5AAC 06.341. The regulation limits drift gillnet vessels to 32 feet in overall length, with a few exceptions. One exception is an anchor roller may extend no more than eight inches beyond the 32-foot overall length and may not be more than eight inches in width or height. The regulation defines "overall length" as the straight-line measurement between the extremities of the vessel, but does not include fish drop-out baskets, anchor rollers, gillnet rollers, trim tabs, outdrives or outdrive guards.

5AAC 06.341 (b) defines each of the items that are not included in the 32-foot measurement:

- "Anchor Roller" means a device used solely in the aid of deploying and retrieving anchor gear, and does not provide any additional flotation, planing surface, or structural support to the vessel.
- "Fish Drop-Out Basket" means a device used solely to prevent the loss of fish from a gillnet after the fish leaves the water and before it is brought on board the vessel; a "fish drop-out basket" does not provide any additional flotation, planing surface, or structural support to the vessel.
- "Gillnet Roller" means a device used solely in aid of deploying and retrieving drift gillnet gear; a "gillnet roller" does not provide any additional flotation or planing surface to the vessel.
- "Outdrive" means part of the propulsion system of a vessel used for either steering or thrust; an "outdrive" does not provide any additional flotation or planing surface to the vessel.
- "Outdrive Guard" means a device of skeletal construction used solely to protect the outdrive unit of a vessel; an "outdrive guard" does not provide any additional flotation or planing surface and is not used for any other purpose such as a bench, platform, or storage area.
- "Trim Tabs" means an extension of the bottom of a vessel, at the transom, which is no more than 18 inches long at its longest point; "trim tabs" do not provide any increased flotation, and their sole function is to provide trim to a vessel while underway.

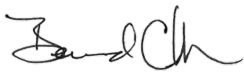
Though many vessels are 32 feet in overall length, AWT has noted multiple items that have been modified, added to, or repositioned on vessels that extend beyond 32 feet and are not allowed by regulation. Examples of possible illegal modifications include, but not limited to:

- Anchor rollers that are longer than the allowed eight inches extending beyond the 32-foot length or are taller and wider than the allowed eight inches.
- Fish drop-out baskets that have been modified significantly. A fish drop-out basket may not provide flotation. Baskets that are built out of large diameter sealed aluminum tubing, which provides flotation when submerged under heavy loads is prohibited. A fish drop-out basket may not provide flotation.
- Gillnet Rollers structures or mounts that extend beyond the 32-foot length. Although gillnet rollers may extend beyond 32 feet, extensions of the transom beyond 32 feet overall length are not allowed. Vessels that have extended their deck working space by building mounting structures off the stern of the vessel and moving the gillnet roller further back are prohibited.
- Outdrive mounts that extend beyond the 32-foot length. Traditionally jet outdrives were bolted directly to the stern. Extension of the hull beyond 32 feet to mount the outdrive is not allowed under regulation.
- Outdrive guards that have been built with large diameter sealed aluminum tubing. If such tubing traps air which provides flotation when submerged it is prohibited under the regulations. Some vessels have guards with aluminum decks added to them to provide a platform or bench. If the vessel has an outdrive guard below the jet unit, it may not provide a planing surface and must be of skeletal construction.
- Trim tabs have been modified and act as extension of the hull if they provide additional flotation are prohibited. Trim tabs have been seen that extend more than the maximum 18-inches beyond the 32-foot overall length. The “trim tab” can be included below the jet unit but may not be more than 18-inches long beyond the 32-foot overall length.
- Miscellaneous items like refrigerated seawater systems, washdown systems, transducers, exhaust, ladders, platforms, and other items have been located aft of the transom are not authorized to be beyond the 32-foot overall length.

The Alaska Wildlife Troopers understand that some adaptations in equipment have occurred over the years to promote product quality and overall safety within the fleet. However, other modifications have been made for operational performance. The current regulations set in place by the Alaska Board of Fisheries provide a fair and equitable playing field for all permit holders. Any adaptation to vessels beyond what is currently allowed needs to be proposed to the Board of Fisheries through the proposal process and amended in regulation prior to implementation.

In an effort to ensure a fair and equitable fishery, AWT will be measuring vessels for possible enforcement action during the 2023 fishing season. If you have questions on your vessel you are encouraged to call the Alaska Wildlife Trooper Post in King Salmon at 907-246-3307, Dillingham at 907-842-5351, Kodiak at 907-486-4762 or Captain Aaron Frenzel at 907-334-2501.

Sincerely,



Colonel Bernard Chastain
Director, Alaska Wildlife Troopers



The Future of the Bristol Bay Salmon Fishery

The Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC) has finished a year-long study to examine ways to revitalize Bristol Bay's salmon fishery. This brochure summarizes some of the study's findings and invites you to take a look at what has been done and share your ideas and concerns. BBEDC wants to give you as many opportunities as possible to learn more about the work and voice your opinions.

The economic viability of our fishery is at stake. The fishery and many communities in the region are on the verge of financial collapse. If nothing is done, income from the fishery will remain low, and the economic hardship in the region will expand.

Fortunately, options are available to significantly improve the fishery. The project report describes the options and issues surrounding them in much greater detail than provided here.

A key conclusion from the report is that *any plan must be designed by the people involved in the fishery*. Any restructuring effort will only work if it is designed and supported by you and your fellow stakeholders in the industry. That is why your input and help are needed.

Why should I care? How can this affect me?

You should care because restructuring may affect you in many important ways. Restructuring might:

- Increase annual incomes to those remaining in the fishery.
- Change the value of your permit.
- Decrease the number of permits and people in the fishery.
- Significantly change local participation in the fishery, thereby having a long-term effect on communities.
- Impact your community tax base

and affect services such as schools and roads.

What's the problem?

The problem is that salmon returns have declined from the unusually high years of the 1980s and 1990s, and salmon prices have been steadily declining since the late 1980s. Lower returns are due in large part to a natural cycle. The increasingly large output from salmon farms has driven Bristol Bay prices down to levels not seen in 30 years.

Take a look at the two graphs on the next page: The first shows how Bristol Bay sockeye runs have varied over the last 120 years and are now down to levels similar to the first half of the 20th century. The second shows that the value of the catch has settled back to levels seen in the 1960s and 1970s (adjusted to today's dollars).

Making the situation worse, overall harvesting costs in the fishery have increased over the last 25 years.



Fishing the north Egegik line, Bristol Bay.

What will happen if we leave the fishery alone?

Leaving the structure of the fishery alone is clearly an option. If nothing is done, the fishery will continue to change or restructure on its own. High-cost harvesters and processors will continue to sell out, but this will do little to improve income for remaining participants. Annual harvests and prices are expected to remain at levels seen in the last few years. The study found that in 2001, fishermen took home an average of only about 5 cents per pound from their catch. High-volume fishermen made more than this, while others made less or even lost money.

Is there anything that can be done?

Yes. Things could be done to improve peoples' income from the fishery.

Economists use the term "wealth" to describe the take-home pay from the fishery after all expenses have been paid, including fuel, crew shares, permit payments, insurance, etc. A goal of restructuring the fishery is to increase the wealth from the fishery or more specifically, increase everyone's take-home pay. To increase the wealth from the fishery, participants can either work to increase the price of fish or reduce the cost of getting fish from the water to the market. There are clearly times and places in the current fishery where more than necessary is spent to catch and process the fish and where higher prices are possible.

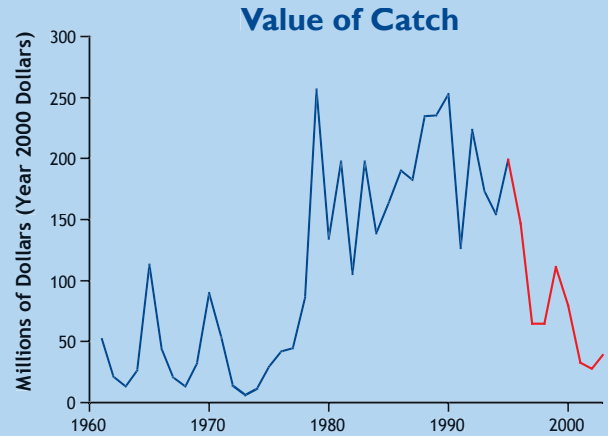
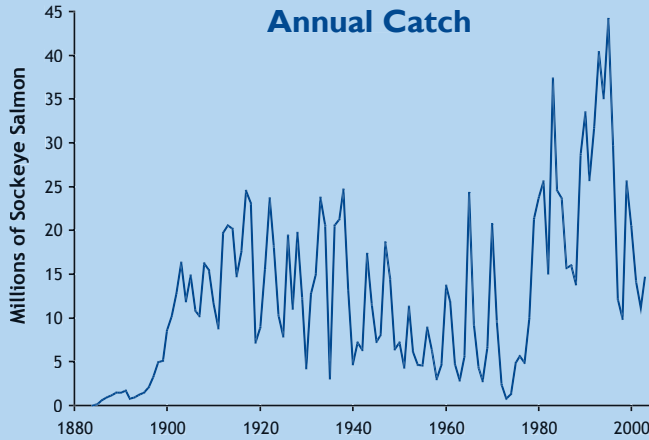
With input from those in the industry, the study identified six significant sources of additional wealth that could be created in the Bristol Bay salmon fishery:

- Reduce the fishing fleet.
- Spread out harvesting over time.
- Use different fishing methods.



Bristol Bay Salmon Fishery

The average annual catch is declining and approaching 15 million fish – a level similar to the first half of the 20th century. The value of the catch has declined to levels last seen in the 1970s.



- Improve product quality.
- Market the harvest better.
- Eliminate the “race for fish” (see sidebar on next page).

Restructuring options to capture new wealth

Take-home pay for fishermen and processors can be increased by *reducing costs and/or raising revenues*. To reduce costs, we must find where it costs more than necessary to harvest and process fish in Bristol Bay. To raise revenues, we must find ways to sell the fish for a higher price. These two categories of locked-up income encompass the six sources of wealth mentioned above. Addressing the six areas could potentially add \$2.6 million to \$42 million annually to the take-home pay from the fishery – compared to the estimated \$3.8 million net income in 2001. On a harvest of 14 million fish, these improvements range from about 3 to 47 cents per pound.

These are substantial improvements to the net income from the fishery, especially if most of the savings are passed on to fishermen. Given that fishermen currently take home about 5 cents per pound on average, restructuring the fishery has the potential to almost double take-home pay and possibly increase it as much as 10 times. The trick is

to identify specific actions to unlock these potential profits from the fishery. The study identified three options which may be implemented alone or in combination.

1. Reduce fleet size by permit reduction and/or consolidation

Reducing the size of the fishing fleet can be accomplished in several different ways. Permit buybacks and permit stacking are two common ways; licensing fishermen to fish alternating periods or days is another way. In Bristol Bay, the setnet and driftnet fleets could be reduced by as much as 50% and still be able to catch the

annual harvest. Significantly reducing the fishing capacity below the current levels would clearly raise net incomes for those still in the fishery. A smaller fleet would reduce the money spent on boats, fuel, and supplies. Fewer people would share the catch and the harvest would be spread over time.

2. Increase the role of fishery managers

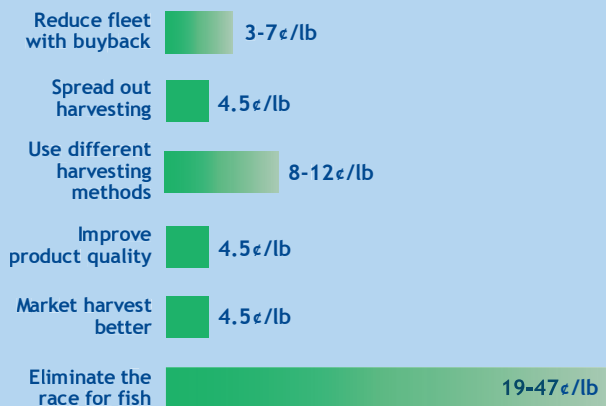
State fishery managers currently focus on managing the fishery to conserve stocks while trying to maximize the size of the catch. Managers do not have a mandate to maximize the *market value* of the catch. New income could be generated if managers took economic and market factors into account when regulating the fishery. Managers might limit the amount each boat can catch per day, further limit the number of vessels to fish a particular day or week in a district, authorize different harvesting methods, and/or implement handling and quality standards. These actions could:

- Improve quality,
- Provide better marketing opportunities, and
- Slow the race for fish.

3. Assign harvest shares to participants

It may be possible to assign a share or percentage of the annual harvest to participants in the fishery. Individuals with

Estimates of Potential Improvements to Net Income from the Bristol Bay Salmon Fishery



The “Race for Fish” and Its Impact on the Fishery

Why are so many boats in the Bristol Bay fishing fleet so powerful and expensive to operate? After all, only 1,200 sailboats were once able to catch the same numbers of fish as today! Over the years, individual fishermen have faced strong incentives to build bigger, faster, larger-capacity boats to beat other fishermen to the catch (i.e., compete in a “race for fish”). After two decades in Bristol Bay, we are left with a fleet of fishing boats that is much larger and more expensive to operate than is necessary to harvest the annual catch (despite a 32-foot limit on length of boats).

Restructuring options that do not eliminate or at least reduce the race for fish will only increase the payoff for individuals to invest more in their boats and fishing operations. As long as there is money to be made by beating the competition to the fish in the short run, fishermen will continue to invest in equipment to improve their chances of winning the race. Restructuring options like permit buybacks and permit stacking do nothing to eliminate the race for fish. Ten to 15 years after implementing a buyback alone in Bristol Bay, we would expect even more of the fleet to look like the larger of the two 32-foot boats in the photo.



© Norm Van Vactor

Two 32-foot driftnet boats in Bristol Bay.

shares would be permitted to form harvesting cooperatives. Managers would treat the cooperatives operating in each district similar to the way the set and driftnet fleets are currently treated, and would open the fisheries so as to guarantee the cooperatives their share of the catch. Like a recent experiment in the nearby Chignik salmon fishery, such a harvest share system could dramatically decrease costs and produce a higher-quality, higher-priced product. A system of harvest shares could achieve several goals at once:

- Reduce the fishing fleet.
- Spread out harvesting over time.
- Use lower-cost fishing methods.
- Improve product quality.
- Provide better marketing opportunities.
- Eliminate the race for fish.

Risks of a buyback

Buying back permits is often thought of as a quick fix: reduce the fleet and make more money. Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. Risks of a buyback include the following:

Return to pre-buyback economic conditions but with fewer boats: Without removing the incentives created by the race for fish, the remaining fleet will continue to build fishing capacity. Ten years after a buyback, we may well see a much smaller fleet spending as much to harvest the fish as today’s fleet.

Take resources away from other investment opportunities: It would take a lot of money to buy back permits, and that money leaves the fishery. The money might be better invested in the fishery to reduce harvesting costs and improve quality or marketing.

Permits may be put back in the fishery in the future: The biggest risk associated with a buyback is that if good economic times ever return to the fishery, individuals outside of the fishery can legally challenge the limited access to the fishery as “too exclusive.” They could be granted permits to reenter the fishery, thereby erasing any benefits of the buyback.

In summary

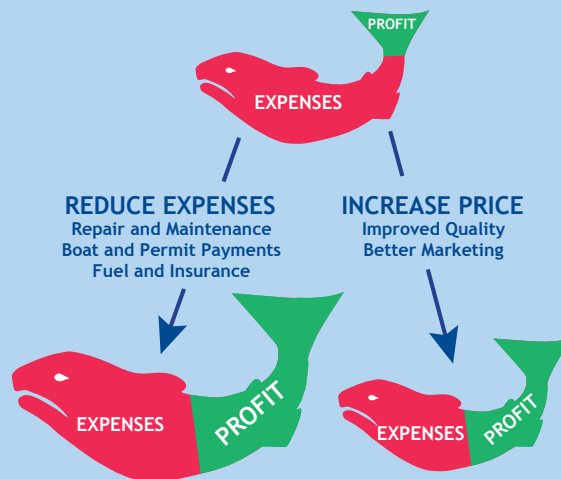
So, although conditions in the fishery are tough, there are several things that could be done to improve participants’ income. The report identified several sources of new income from the fishery. The restructuring options mentioned above are practical approaches to access this untapped income. However, the details of designing and implementing the options are complex. The report concludes that those in the fishery must work out these details if any option is to succeed.

What happens next?

That depends on the input we receive from stakeholders like you. Please tell us what you would like to see happen by contacting us or attending meetings (see back page). For example, do you think the fishery should be left alone, or is restructuring needed? What restructuring options do you like or don’t like?

After public input, it should be clear if there is support for restructuring. If those in the fishery favor leaving it alone, nothing more may happen. If stakeholders want to see changes, the next step might be to form a regional task force with representatives from different sectors in the fishery. Their mandate could be to design a plan to restructure the fishery.

Restructuring: Reduce Expenses and Improve Fish Price





Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation
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Dillingham, Alaska 99576



AN ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS TO
RESTRUCTURE THE BRISTOL BAY
SALMON FISHERY



A Study Commissioned by the Bristol Bay Economic
Development Corporation

March 2003

A Study of the Bristol Bay Salmon Fishery is Complete and Your Input is Needed!

The Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC) and the Joint Legislative Salmon Industry Task Force funded this study of options for restructuring the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. The project started in February 2002, and the final report was completed in March 2003. BBEDC took a lead role because no single issue is more critical to the future of the region's economy. A research team made up of economists, fisheries experts, and an historian conducted the research over 12 months. The team received input from industry, the public, and an 11-member Advisory Panel composed of seven fishermen, a manager of a salmon processing facility, a fishery manager, an economist, and the Chairman of the State's Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission.

Brochures explaining the study and soliciting input were distributed to stakeholders, and public meetings were held in three Bristol Bay communities. A project website (www.bbsalmon.com) was established, and many meetings were held between the study team and stakeholders.

Ways to Learn More and Provide Input:

- Read this brochure
- Read the final report (from website www.bbsalmon.com or write to us at Box 1464, Dillingham, AK 99576)
- Attend the upcoming workshops and meetings
- Email us at: bbsalmon@lgl.com
- Visit the website and post your comments.

Workshops are Currently Scheduled for:

- **King Salmon:** 1 pm, September 16, 2003, King Salmon Village Council
- **Dillingham:** 1 pm, September 18, 2003, Curyung Tribal Council
- **Pacific Northwest:** To be announced (check website for updates)



ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES
FINDINGS OF FACT

Bristol Bay 32 Foot Vessel Length
5 AAC 06.341
#81-92-FB

After hearing a report on the Findings of the Governor's Bristol Bay Task Force, conducting a public hearing on 5 AAC 06.341 in accordance with the Administrative Procedure Act, and discussing the subject, the Board of Fisheries on April 4, 1981 by unanimous action, adopted a regulation to continue the 32 foot vessel length for the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. The Board considered this action to be consistent with its responsibilities to conserve and develop the salmon resources of Bristol Bay, promote the orderly harvesting and marketing of quality fishery products and to maximize the public interest.

The action of the Board in 1979 to repeal the 32 foot length limit by 1982 had been based in part on the premise that larger vessels would permit the use of ice to improve quality. However, Bristol Bay processors who imposed 12 hour delivery requirements on fishermen in 1980 showed that more frequent deliveries by existing vessels can adequately improve quality. An increased vessel length that allows the use of ice, chilled brine or special insulation is not necessary to achieve the desired quality improvements at this time.

The Board also reviewed testimony indicating that until recent years the average costs of the Bristol Bay gillnet vessels were in the \$5,000 to \$20,000 range. In recent years 32 foot vessels costing as much as \$150,000 are being constructed to participate in the fishery. The use of these larger capacity, more expensive boats has, in some cases, resulted in over capitalization by fishermen and is believed to have contributed to lengthy price disputes and threats of violence prior to the 1980 price settlement as fishermen felt obligated to achieve continued high prices to meet boat payments.

Repeal of the 32 foot limit will interfere with production economies of scale associated with construction of standard size vessel. Unlimited size will therefore exacerbate the problem of overcapitalization in the Bay area.

During the public hearing, Representative Joe Chuckwuk testified that repealing the 32 foot limit in 1982 would work a hardship on the Bristol Bay fishermen who had already invested in newer, larger-capacity 32 foot boats. In addition the Board also received the results of a January 1981 mail survey of all setnet and drift gillnet limited entry card holder and interim use permittees in the Bristol Bay salmon fishery. Of the 2,668 ballots mailed out, 81% of the 2,003 ballots returned favored reestablishment of the 32 foot length.

The conduct of the Bristol Bay fishery has been based upon the 32 foot length vessel for more than 30 years. Continuation of the length restriction will promote stability and predictability in the fishery.

ADOPTED: Anchorage, Alaska
April 7, 1981

VOTE: 5-0

Nick Szabo, Chairman

ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES
FINDING OF FACT
ON
BRISTOL BAY 32 FOOT VESSEL LENGTH
2019-295-FB

RC 127

This written finding is intended to inform and educate future boards and the public as to the history of the 32-foot vessel length limitation to vessels participating in the drift gillnet fishery.

The 32-foot length limitation in Bristol Bay was established in 1949. That overall length remains unchanged through the date of this finding however there have been some descriptive changes of "length" throughout the years. The current regulation and description have been in effect since 1991, proposals to increase the length limit have been before the board in almost every cycle since 1991.

The board has not passed a modification to vessel length since the 1979 board meeting where the board repealed the 32-foot length limit effective prior to the 1982 fishing season. A subsequent board in 1981 adopted a regulation to continue the 32-foot vessel length. That board considered their action to be consistent with its responsibilities to conserve and develop the salmon resources of Bristol Bay, promote the orderly harvest and marketing quality of fishery products and to maximize the public interest.

Currently common justifications found in proposals in favor of changing or removing the 32-foot limit include:

- increased safety with larger vessels
- greater economic efficiency because of larger holding capacity, and improved product quality with increased size allowing installation of refrigeration of fish or increased capacity for icing/cooling of fish.
- larger vessel could be used in other fisheries more readily

Items commonly considered that are counter to a modification of the 32-foot length limit:

- increase in vessel length will likely increase harvest capacity and efficiency of the entire fleet
- increase in capacity/efficiency will exacerbate the allocation balance between the 2 gear groups
- greater disparity between fisherman who can afford to acquire a larger vessel and those who cannot.
- the Bristol Bay fishery is a limited entry fishery which limits the number of licenses to individual participants in the fishery. If individual permit holders are allowed to gain capacity after the fishery has been limited the overall intent of the limited entry program is undermined and can become ineffective.
- the Alaska Legislature and the BOF have made significant strides in allowing Bristol Bay fisherman to combine efforts to reduce both their operating costs and overall fishing effort, a change to the 32-foot vessel length would make those measures less effective.
- the percentage of vessels chilling their catch has risen from 24% in 2008 to 73% in 2017, this significant increase has been accomplished within the 32-foot length limit.

Over the last 69 years and an estimated 30 Bristol Bay regulatory meetings the 32-foot length limit has never been modified by regulation. Countless hours by the board and public have resulted in no changes to this foundational aspect of the Bristol Bay commercial salmon fishery.

This finding is to be considered a companion and update to the 1981 finding #81-92-FB.