

HARVESTING COOPERATIVES

Pollock Conservation Cooperative

The Pollock Conservation Cooperative (PCC) was established in 1999 and is made up of six member companies operating 19 catch-processor vessels in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. The Bering Sea pollock fishery is industrial in nature with vessels ranging in size from 230 to 360 feet.¹ Landings are processed at-sea into various products forms including surimi and whole fillets. Non-edible portions of the pollock are processed into fish meal, which is used as aquaculture feed and fertilizer. As an industry led initiative the PCC is used to coordinate harvesting activities that promote conservation of fish stocks and better utilization of landed fish. The cooperative does not coordinate processing, marketing, or sales activities.²

Alaska pollock (*Theragra chalcogramma*) aggregate in large schools and are caught using mid-water trawl nets.³ The Alaska pollock fishery is the largest in the United States, accounting for one-third of all US fish harvests.⁴ The PCC shares the pollock stocks with two other fishing sectors – the mothership fleet and the shoreside fleet. After reserving a portion of the scientifically determined available catch for coastal communities and mortality in the non-pollock groundfish sectors, the remaining catch limit is divided among these sectors. The shoreside fleet receives 50%, the catch-processor fleet receives 40% and the mothership fleet receives 10%.⁵ While the PCC only manages the catcher-processor fleet, other cooperatives have formed in the other sectors that target pollock.

History

The Bering Sea pollock fishery has a history of use by large, industrial vessels, first by foreign fleets, and then by U.S. fleets beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1998, the American Fisheries Act (AFA) was passed. Among other things, the AFA established a three-sector allocation regime that provided the necessary framework for the catcher-processor fleet to organize a fish harvesting cooperative and granted legislative authority to, and a clear framework for, the shoreside and mothership sectors to also organize cooperatives. Prior to the passage of AFA and the formation of the PCC and other pollock co-ops, there were two sectors and a race for fish among eligible members of each sector to catch the sectoral allocation. While the fishery closed when sectoral quotas were caught, avoiding conservation concerns about the health of the stock, the race for fish precluded other conservation and economic benefits from being achieved.

Performance

The cooperative catch share has improved both the conservation practices and economic health of the fishery. Under the PCC, the pace of fishing has slowed resulting in more conservation minded practices, better timing of harvests to demand, and more flexibility for on-board processing of products. This season has lengthened from 74 days in 1998 to 285 days in 2009.⁶ Since 1999 catcher-processor vessels are producing 50% more product per pound of fish landed⁷, with product recovery rates increasing from 19.5% to 30%.⁸





This increase in yield applies equally to primary products, such as surimi and fillets, as it does to secondary products, such as fish meal and fish oil.

The PCC engages in number of innovative programs to manage their catch. In 2001, the PCC began a voluntary salmon bycatch reduction program. Cooperative members share catch and landings data, which are analyzed by Sea State, a private firm contracted by PCC, to determine bycatch hotspots. Sea State notifies the fleet of bycatch hot spots so that vessels avoid fishing in areas where bycatch will be high.⁹ The program has been “voluntary” in that it is a private sector initiative that complemented federal fishery regulations on salmon bycatch avoidance, but by private contract enforceable by fines, PCC members were obligated to avoid any bycatch hotspots identified by SeaState based on vessel performance. This initiative is being incorporated into new federal bycatch reduction regulations.

Capacity in the fishery is now better matched to the harvesting opportunities and the cooperative has increased efficiency. The fishery once used around thirty vessels to catch the limit in a short time period, and now uses about 15 or 16 vessels in any given year over a longer time period.¹⁰ Reflecting the biological performance of the fishery, it received Marine Stewardship Council Certification in 2005, a designation that was renewed in 2010.¹¹

Key Design Features

Fishermen led the formation of the cooperative and participation is completely voluntary. Prior to the formation of the PCC, there were few, if any, fishing harvesting cooperatives and little precedent for their creation. Because the AFA did not grant any specific legal authority to the catcher-processor sector to enter into a cooperative agreement, the fleet operators did outline their plans in a letter to the Department of Justice’s Anti-Trust Division. The Department of Justice provided a “blessing” that the cooperative was not in violation of anti-trust laws. Once established, the cooperative members undertook negotiations to determine allocations between member companies, which were based on recent catch history.¹²

The PCC uses a number of sophisticated accountability measures. All catcher-processor vessels are required to carry two federally trained observers for all harvesting trips. By watching nearly every haul, observers count target and non-target as well as engage in fishery research. PCC vessels are also equipped with scales that weigh all landings as they are brought onto the vessel. A Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) is in effect, allowing regulators to track each vessel’s location at all times. NMFS uses catch data reported electronically by fishery observers to ensure the fleet does not harvest above its sector allocation. Sea State receives the observer data to monitor harvest amounts of each PCC member to ensure each member stays within its individual allocation.¹³



Sources

- ¹ Wilen, J. and Richardson, E. 2008. Rent generation in the Alaskan pollock conservation cooperative. Townsend, R., et al. (eds). Case studies on fisheries self-governance. FAO Fisheries Technical Paper No. 405. FAO, Rome (Italy).
- ² At-sea Processors Association (APA). Date unknown. The Pollock Conservation Cooperative: A Private Sector Initiative Promoting Conservation of Marine Resources. At-sea Processors Association.
- ³ APA, data unknown
- ⁴ APA, data unknown
- ⁵ Wilen and Richardson, 2008
- ⁶ NMFS Alaska Regional Office, 2009
- ⁷ APA, data unknown
- ⁸ Wilen and Richardson, 2008
- ⁹ APA, data unknown
- ¹⁰ APA, data unknown
- ¹¹ Chafee, C., Smith, T., Furness, R. and Jensen, T. 2005. MSC Assessment Reports: The United States Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Pollock Fishery. Scientific Certification Systems, Inc.
- ¹² Wilen and Richardson, 2008
- ¹³ APA, data unknown

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