



Cook Inlet Fishermen, Communities Call New Alternative Salmon Plan “Appalling”, “Ludicrous”

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Cook Inlet salmon management is tough enough, with several user groups lobbying for a bigger piece of the annual pie, but added to the challenge is its location. Cook Inlet is at the center of the state’s largest population density and, unlike other salmon areas in Alaska, accessible by road for more than 60% of Alaska’s population. The area has been ground zero for the ‘recreational vs commercial’ battle for generations.

Now, a successful 2013 lawsuit brought by United Cook Inlet Drift Association (UCIDA) against the National Marine Fisheries Service, challenging a decision by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council to remove federal waters in Cook Inlet from the scope of the federal salmon fishery management plan, has finally reached decision time by that Council. While the lawsuit sought federal management standards to be used by state salmon managers, a recently added option before the Council calls for the closure of all commercial fishing in a part of Cook Inlet.

Before the lawsuit, NMFS authorized the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to manage the fishery, including extensive in-season management, a difficult but effective way to manage a fishery that happens only during the weeks and months the salmon are traveling through.

The added fourth alternative came last month during a Council meeting. Next week the Council will take action on the four options before them. Alternative 1 is always Status Quo, but the court order prohibits that.

Alternative 2 would establish federal authority in the Cook Inlet EEZ, but would allow some management measures to be established by the State of Alaska.

Alternative 3 would occur entirely at the federal level. This would be similar to how fisheries are managed under the Council’s GOA and BSAI Groundfish Fishery Management Plans

Alternative 4 would mandate that commercial salmon fishing in Cook Inlet would only occur in state jurisdictional waters, involving established state management processes, and no changes to Federal management would be necessary.

More than 200 letters protested the added Alternative 4, nearly all of them supporting Alternative 2 or an amendment version of it.

Alternative 4 “intentionally closes the EEZ waters to commercial fishing, certainly guarantees substantial harm to fishermen and coastal economies through the loss of those traditional fishing grounds,” wrote Hannah Heimbuch, a third-generation fisherman and resident of Homer, AK.

“This loss would be particularly felt in Homer, as EEZ closure would transfer the majority of fishing to the more northern areas. Homer would see a drastic decline in port deliveries, vessel moorage and many other associated economic drivers. Closure is an unacceptable outcome for communities that rely upon these fisheries and the

revenue they generate. It is also unreasonable to put this option on the table at this late stage of development, particularly considering the severity of the impacts it poses. This is a sharp departure from the focus of the past two years, which has been on Alternative 2.”

She added, “The political and allocative tensions in Cook Inlet are exhausting. Our solution to that contention cannot be eliminating an entire stakeholder group, at great cost to our coastal economies and cultures. That is the clear messages from our community leaders, marine business leaders, local residents and our fishermen.”

Erik Huebsch, Vice President of UCIDA, the group that brought the lawsuit against the agency, pointed out the problems with current management.

“ADF&G is now deliberately and explicitly setting escapement goals substantially lower than 90% of MSY (maximum sustainable yield),” Huebsch wrote.

He said that a few of the many Cook Inlet salmon stocks that are not being managed to MSY, are being managed with “wider goals” and “lower performance requirements.” That results, Huebsch says, in reduced harvests and unnecessarily high escapement goals.

“Harvests have been even further reduced by escapements exceeding the upper limit of already too-high escapement goals. They are using incorrect escapement goals and prescriptive management plans that limit in-season adaptive management and the result is diminished returns and continued lost yield. In other words, the state is managing the Cook Inlet salmon fishery with the objective of putting the commercial fishing industry out of business,” he wrote.

The United Fishermen of Alaska wrote, “Option 4 is not a benign action that would treat all Alaska stakeholders equitably. The analysis points out that it is highly likely that closing the EEZ waters of Cook Inlet will reallocate fish resources from the drift gillnet fishery to the other Cook Inlet user groups.

“While the MSA does allow for reallocation, under national standard 4 there are criteria that must be considered in allocation decisions including that the allocation is “fair and equitable to all such fishermen...” UFA is unable to find the Council’s analysis regarding the allocative impacts of Alternative 4. Will it trim the drifter’s commercial catch by 5% or 95%? Will it be the tipping point to put Cook Inlet commercial drift fishermen out of business? Will the reallocation’s additional escapement result in a net loss of salmon in the entire fishery? How does increasing over-escapement align with National Standard (2) regarding using the best scientific information, which would be the escapement goals themselves?,” ask UFA President Matt Allward and Executive Director Frances Leach.

Lindsey Wong of Wong Seafoods, a small processor in the Kenai Peninsula who also runs a bed and breakfast, said, “Don’t make the year 2020 more worse than it already is. Approve alternative 2 with amendments to comply with Magnuson-Stevens Act National Standards as required by law!!! Reject alternative 4 entirely. This was unethically late submitted, is unvetted and would collapse the longstanding viable Cook Inlet salmon fishery in direct opposition to the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, common sense, and the benefit and sustainability of the local communities and economies.”

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