UNALASKA, AK (KUCB) - Today, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council wraps up its meeting in Anchorage. For the past week, the council and its advisory panel have reviewed changes to the salmon fishery management plan, discussed changes to the Pacific cod jig fishery, and talked about how federal regulations affect cod trawlers.

This weekend, the council also focused on the state of the Pribilof Islands Blue King Crab stock and how this dwindling fishery could be rebuilt. It been over a decade since crabbers have been allowed to harvest this stock, but the blue king crab population hasn't rebounded since the closure. Now, the Council is reviewing a rebuilding plan that could close some grounds to flatfish vessels in an attempt to reduce crab bycatch.

At the council meeting, both members of the industry and the advisory panel suggested that more analysis needs to be done before a rebuilding plan could be adopted. Many expressed skepticism that extra closures would do anything to help rebuild the stock.

"The concern I have with the action before you - especially when it's final action -is that I just am not at all convinced that no matter how large of a closure area you create for groundfish that it's going to have any realistic impact or benefit in terms of rebuilding," says Edward Poulsen, who represents the group Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers. "This is really an environmentally driven issue - not an overfishing issue, not a bycatch issue. Simply, the water temperatures haven't been cold enough to allow for these crabs to rebuild."

He adds that even though his group would have the most to gain from a rebound of the blue king crab stock, he does not support the proposed final action.

But some scientists say that every little effort could help foster population growth since the stock is so fragile. Ben Daly is a research biologist with the Alaska Sea Grant program, and
he's currently studying ways to rebuild king crab stock through hatchery programs.

"My understanding is that closures would be effective to rebuild the adult population structure," says Daly.

But Daly adds that there are other ways to help blue king crab numbers in the Pribilof Islands. In particular, he's working on research that looks at how to improve the survival of blue king crabs in the face of predation. He's also studying how feasible it would be to raise hatchery-born crabs and then release them into their traditional grounds.

Ultimately, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council decided not to take a final action on the Pribilof Islands blue king crab rebuilding plan. The earliest the Council could take up the blue king crab rebuilding plan again would be at the October council meeting, which will be held here in Unalaska.

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