



Governor Michael J. Dunleavy
STATE OF ALASKA

March 12, 2020

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary of Commerce
United States Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Re: 2019 Norton Sound Red King Crab Fishery Disaster Request

Dear Secretary Ross:

In accordance with Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, I am writing to request that you declare a fishery disaster for the 2019 Norton Sound red king crab fishery. The 2019 fishery harvests and revenues were significantly less than recent years due to poor sea ice conditions and historically low catch rates. The revenue loss from the 2019 fishery has resulted in severe negative economic impacts for fishery participants and small, rural coastal communities that rely on this high-value and low-volume fishery for the majority of their income. Poor catches of red king crab in 2019 also negatively affected Norton Sound residents who harvest red king crab in the subsistence fishery.

The 2019 commercial fishery harvest was 76 percent lower than in 2018, and 83 percent lower than average harvest numbers for the previous five years. Due to very poor fishery performance, 52 percent of the 2019 catch limit was taken, despite normal levels of fishing effort on the grounds. The 2019 harvest reductions resulted in a 74 percent fishery revenue loss compared to 2018, and an 80 percent loss compared to average fishery revenue from the previous five years.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has managed the Norton Sound red king crab fishery since the 1970s. In 1993, fishery participation was limited to small vessels in order to maximize fishery benefits to local and regional fishery participants and communities. The fishery takes place in two seasons. The winter commercial crab fishery is a small fishery using hand lines and pots through nearshore ice. Participants target about eight percent of the total fishery catch limit in the winter fishery. The summer commercial crab fishery targets the remaining 92 percent of the total fishery catch limit, and occurs offshore using pot gear on vessels that are less than 60 feet in length.

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In 2019, the winter crab fishery was extremely challenging for fishery participants to execute due to poor ice conditions throughout the season. Very little ice formed during the winter of 2018/2019 due to water temperatures that were far above normal and southerly winds that were much stronger than normal. Some fishing areas did not meet the minimum requirements to set gear legally, and resulted in no effort. Although some fishermen participated in the fishery in areas that were open to fishing, only one-quarter of the winter fishery catch limit was harvested. This was the lowest harvest level in over ten years, and resulted in significant revenue losses for affected fishery participants and communities.

Fishermen in the summer crab fishery encountered historically low catch rates and reported that they spent most of the season searching for harvestable concentrations of crab that were ultimately not found. The total summer harvest was approximately half of the summer fishery catch limit and resulted in significant revenue losses for affected fishery participants and communities.

The poor performance of the 2019 winter and summer crab fisheries negatively impacted vessel owners and operators, crew, and fish processors, as well as the support industries that sell fuel and supplies to fishery participants. Local governments also experienced a negative impact to their economic base, and the State of Alaska will see a decline in fishery-related tax revenue.

Based on the revenue losses in the 2019 Norton Sound red king crab fishery, and the resulting severe economic impacts on affected fishery participants and communities, I respectfully request that you make the determination that a commercial fishery failure occurred due to a fishery resource disaster under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Determination of a commercial fishery failure will make this fishery eligible for fishery disaster funds to assist affected fishery participants and communities and to support research and data collection that will help restore the fishery and prevent a similar fishery failure in the future.

I appreciate your consideration of this request and have asked the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to provide National Marine Fisheries Service and your office with any additional information needed to make a fishery disaster determination.

Sincerely,



Mike Dunleavy
Governor

cc: The Honorable Lisa Murkowski, United States Senate
The Honorable Dan Sullivan, United States Senate
The Honorable Don Young, United States House of Representatives
The Honorable Doug Vincent-Lang, Commissioner, Alaska Department of Fish and Game
John Moller, Policy Advisor, Office of the Governor