

Amendment 15
to the Fishery Management Plan for the
Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands King and Tanner Crabs.

(1) In Section 6.0 entitled “Specification of Maximum Sustainable Yield, Optimum Yield, Minimum Stock Size Thresholds, Overfishing Levels, Annual Harvest, and Annual Processing”, under subsection 6.1 “Rebuilding Overfished Fisheries,” add subsection 6.1.3 “St. Matthew blue king (*Paralithodes platypus*) crab.”

6.1 Rebuilding Overfished Fisheries

6.1.1 Bering Sea Tanner (*Chionoecetes bairdi*) crab

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6.1.2 Bering Sea snow (*C. opilio*) crab

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6.1.3 St. Matthew blue king (*Paralithodes platypus*) crab

NMFS declared St. Matthew blue king crab overfished on September 24, 1999, because the spawning biomass estimated from the NMFS trawl survey was below the minimum stock size threshold of 11 million pounds specified in this FMP. The Council developed a rebuilding plan for the St. Matthew blue king crab stock within one year from this date, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act in section 304(e). The rebuilding plan is sufficient to rebuild the stock to the Bmsy level, the rebuilding time period satisfies the requirements of section 304(e)(4)(A) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and the plan complies with the national standard guidelines at 50 CFR 600.310(e).

The rebuilding plan approved by the Council in June 2000 contains the following three components to improve the status of this stock: a harvest strategy, bycatch control measures, and habitat protection measures. This is a framework rebuilding plan because the FMP defers to the State the authority to develop harvest strategies, gear modification measures, and habitat protection areas in State waters, with oversight by NMFS and the Council (see Section 8.0). The rebuilding plan is estimated to allow the St. Matthew blue king crab stock to rebuild, with a 50% probability, to the Bmsy level in less than 10 years. The stock will be considered “rebuilt” when the stock reaches Bmsy in two consecutive years.

The rebuilding plan incorporates the harvest strategy developed by ADF&G and adopted by the Alaska Board of Fisheries. The revised harvest strategy should result in more spawning biomass as more larger male crab would be conserved and fewer juveniles and females would die due to incidental catch and discard mortality. This higher spawning biomass would be expected to produce good year-classes when environmental conditions are favorable.

The rebuilding plan also incorporates the following conservation measures taken by the Alaska Board of Fisheries; gear modification measures to reduce bycatch of female and sub-legal male blue

king in the directed crab fishery, and a habitat protection area to protect egg-baring females in State waters around St. Matthew Island, Hall Island and Pinnacles Island. The reduction of bycatch and protection of habitat will reduce mortality on juvenile crabs and egg-baring females, thus allowing a higher percentage of each year-class to contribute to spawning (and future landings).

Mechanisms are in place for monitoring the effectiveness of the rebuilding plan. The NMFS eastern Bering Sea bottom-trawl survey provides an annual assessment of the status of the St. Matthew blue king crab stock. ADF&G also conducts a pot survey on a triennial basis for blue king crab in the St. Matthew area. Most of the pot survey effort is devoted to the area south of St. Matthew Island in the relatively shallow waters (25-55 fm) that supports much of the blue king crab commercial fishery and the mature female population. Use of pots allows for surveying areas that are not accessible to the NMFS trawl survey. This survey is invaluable for providing population indices and indicators of crab distribution for large portions of the legal and mature female stock that are not represented in the annual NMFS trawl survey. ADF&G will use the results of these surveys to determine fishery openings and harvest levels according to the St. Matthew blue king crab harvest strategy.

The surveys will allow the BSAI Crab Plan Team to include an assessment of the St. Matthew blue king crab stock status relative to the overfished level and its progress towards the rebuilt level in the annual Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Report for the king and Tanner crab fisheries of the BSAI. Existing monitoring programs will be used by ADF&G and NMFS to contain levels of catch and bycatch at those prescribed in the rebuilding plan.