

A pilot program for harvesting Kodiak rockfish

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In 2007, fishing for Pacific Rockfish (*Sebastes* sp.) took place in the Central Gulf of Alaska under a 5-year pilot program that incorporated fishery cooperatives instead of the usual “race for fish.” Results after the first year indicate increased retention rates, reduced bycatch of non-target species, and positive economic and other benefits to the Kodiak Island community.

“In its first year, the pilot program was successful in slowing the pace of the fishery, improving product quality, reducing bycatch, and giving a boost to the local economy,” said Julie Bonney, executive director of the Alaska Groundfish Data Bank and manager of the cooperative fishery. “It shifted a significant part of the catch to off-peak months, avoiding conflicts with the salmon season and lowering unemployment on the island.”

The Rockfish Pilot Program (RPP) was directed by Congress and developed by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council as the first multi-species rationalization program in the North Pacific. The 5-year RPP was limited to trawlers in the Central Gulf of Alaska that target Pacific Ocean Perch (*S. alutus*), Northern Rockfish (*S. polyspinis*) and Pelagic Shelf Rockfish, a complex that includes dusky, dark, yellowtail and widow rockfish. Secondary species harvested in the fishery include Pacific Cod (*Gadus macrocephalus*), Thornyhead Rockfish (*Sebastolobus alascanus*) and Sablefish (*Anoplopoma fimbria*).

In past years, the competitive fishery occurred during the first three

weeks of July during which weekly catches peaked at 5,000 metric tons (mt) and delivered just as the processing sector was gearing up for the busy salmon season. A primary objective of the RPP was to help stabilize the residential processing workforce by shifting this harvest to times of the year with low processing volumes such as May and June.

Under the pilot program, the rockfish quota was divided among the participants based on their individual catch history, and fishermen were required to partner with their previous processor. Given a choice between the old derby and the cooperative fishery, 99% of the qualified license holders signed on to the new plan. No consolidation occurred among the fishing fleet: 26 vessels participated in the fishery this year compared to 25 boats in 2006 and included some who took advantage of a provision to attract new entrants.

Under the cooperative fishery, the rockfish season opened May 1 and continued through November. Most of the catch occurred during the months of May and June, when landings ranged between 1,000 and 2,000 mt per week. That was usually a slack season for processors and corresponded to seasonal peak in unemployment and drops in demand for electricity and water.

“The change in season allowed more rockfish to be brought and processed onshore,” Bonney said. “Local rockfish production jumped 20%, from 15.2 million pounds in 2006 to 18.3 million pounds this year. More work for the local processors saw the unemployment rate in Kodiak during May and June drop from 9.1% and 10.5% last year to 5.7% and 6.2% respectively this year.”

Absent the “race for fish,” processors were allowed to focus on more high-value products. Production of value-added fillets tripled while the amount of lower-priced whole fish production was cut in half and the need to process the lowest-priced product, surimi, was eliminated

entirely. The fleet also demonstrated the cooperative fishery could help achieve important conservation goals.

“Strict bycatch standards were imposed by the participants; individual fishermen could be held accountable for unacceptable rates and that prompted them to innovate,” Bonney said. “The result was an almost 50% increase in the catch of rockfish taken by pelagic gear, fewer gear impacts to bottom habitat and more than a 70% reduction in halibut bycatch.”

Improved retention and utilization of the harvest was also a goal of the pilot project and discard rates were held at close to zero.

Like any new program, not everything was perfect the first year. The observer requirements (100 percent for vessels and 200 percent for processors) were costly. Processors were surprised by initial market resistance to fresh rockfish. The price fishermen received, while higher than before, wasn’t as much as some hoped.

“With any major change, you can’t expect to achieve all benefits in the first year, but the participants in Kodiak’s Rockfish Pilot Program are very pleased with the success of the cooperative fishery and look to build on that to achieve additional benefits for harvesters, processors and the broader community of Kodiak,” Bonney said.

Kodiak ranks as the nation’s 4th largest fishing port in terms of volume with 332.8 million pounds processed in 2006 and placed 3rd in value, worth \$101.4 million of which the rockfish fishery accounts for approximately \$3 million. Kodiak is home to multiple processing plants that handle a wide variety of seafood: salmon, halibut, crab, herring, rockfish and more, is home-port to many family-owned fishing vessels and boasts the only year-round residential processing workforce in Alaska.

Source: Marine Conservation Alliance

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