

PROPOSAL 223 – 5 AAC 34.925. Lawful gear for Registration Area Q.

5 AAC 34.925(e)(2) is amended to read:

(2) in the Norton Sound Section of the Northern District, **as follows:**

(A) an aggregate of no more than 50 pots may be operated from a validly registered king crab vessel with an overall length of more than 125 feet; [, AND]

(B) an aggregate of no more than 40 pots may be operated from a validly registered king crab vessel with an overall length of 125 feet or less;

(C) a permit holder may operate no more than 20 king crab pots described in (d) of this section during the winter through-the-ice commercial king crab season described in 5 AAC 34.910(d)(2);

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? A convergence of a robust red king crab population, strong overseas markets for live king crab, and high dock prices have led to record winter commercial harvests and levels of fishing effort since 2012: 7,314 pot lifts occurred in 2015 and over 4,000 pot lifts occurred in 2014 despite unfishable ice conditions throughout much of Norton Sound. The level of effort during the past 3 seasons is unprecedented because it has historically been cost prohibitive to fish a large number of pots through the ice.

The Norton Sound winter commercial king crab fishery has rapidly expanded to a highly competitive fishery in recent years. As shorefast ice develops, fishermen compete to occupy the outer edge of the ice to maximize catch rates. This relatively active ice is unstable and frequently breaks off. Recent regulation changes have partially addressed the issue of pot loss by shortening season dates to a period when sea ice stability is more optimal. However, the new season dates do not adequately address the issue of pot losses resulting from permit holders working the outer, less stable expanses of sea ice.

A large factor contributing to recent pot losses is the recent attitude among some permit holders who now view pots as a consumable item, in contrast to the former attitude that pots were multiyear equipment. Implementing a winter commercial pot limit would incentivize commercial fishermen to view commercial pot gear as a long term investment rather than the current situation in which pots are simply a business expense. Reducing the amount of commercial gear should lessen crowding at the ice edge to prevent the constant leapfrogging of the pots onto increasingly unstable ice expanses. Pot limits and their enforcement would also provide fishery managers with more reliable estimates of pot loss in season. If pot losses are high, the department may need to implement restrictions or closures in season in order to mitigate or eliminate further pot losses in years with marginal sea ice conditions so as to reduce ghost fishing by derelict pot gear. A winter commercial pot limit should also reduce conflicts with subsistence users competing for space along the same ice expanses.

Proposed by: Northern Norton Sound Advisory Committee.

(formerly ACR 4)
