

RESOLUTION ON HIGH SEAS SALMON HARVEST

The Alaska Board of Fisheries in 1980 expressed its grave concern over the 1980 high seas directed mothership harvest of Western Alaska chinook of nearly 400,000 fish and a total chinook harvest of over 700,000 fish. This harvest was taken in addition to a harvest of over 100,000 chinook taken incidentally in foreign Bering Sea trawl fisheries. A harvest of this magnitude exceeds that taken in the inshore fisheries in most years and represents a tremendous loss in biomass due to the harvest of immature fish. Dropout rates are not known so the loss to inshore fisheries may be significantly greater than the catch statistics would indicate.

Two events helped alleviate the situation in 1981. First, through discussions between Japanese officials and Western Alaska fishermen a schedule for reduction of trawl interceptions was agreed to and adopted by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. It appears that this problem is being addressed.

The Japanese government and industry also visited Alaska to outline a program of voluntary reduction of the chinook harvest in the high seas mothership fishery. They decided to limit their aggregate three season total chinook catch for all areas to 330,000 chinook with an annual limit of 110,000 with a ± 10 percent variance allowed. The catch for 1977-1979 averaged about 110,000 chinook per year.

The State, the Board, and Western Alaska fishermen had reservations about the enforceability of this program and its potential impact on Western Alaska stocks. There was concern that even with a ceiling of 110,000 fish if the majority of the catch came from areas with high Western Alaska abundance particularly in the Central Bering Sea, it would be damaging to the inshore fishery.

Catches reported by the Japanese indicate that some 70,000 chinook were taken in 1981, with a very small part of the catch from the Central Bering Sea. U.S. observers were present on motherships and a small sample of the catcher boat fleet only in our FCZ. No U.S. observers were allowed on motherships or catcher boats outside our zone. Observer data where available indicated some discrepancies between king catch recorded from catcher boats and the numbers delivered to the motherships. The sample was small and the results inconclusive, but it does raise some question regarding accuracy of the statistics.

Assuming Japanese Fishery Agency mothership observers were able to accurately record the chinook deliveries from the catcher boats there were no JFA observers on catcher boats to guarantee that sorting and discard of chinook did not take place. Since the fishery would be closed if the chinook catch exceeded the ceiling, there is some incentive for fishermen to misreport the catch. Additionally, it is not clear how the Japanese fleet avoided catching chinook in 1981 so the operation of the system remains unexplained.

The Board understands that opportunity to take the high seas quota harvest by the mothership fisheries is available without substantial

effort occurring in the Central Bering Sea. Much of the harvest is allowed to be taken in our FCZ. Asiatic salmon are at least available in the western part of the Central Bering Sea and the need to operate in the eastern portion is not apparent.

The Board therefore concludes:

WHEREAS, the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 reserves to United States fishermen all of the harvestable surplus of fisheries resources when the surpluses can be taken by domestic fishermen; and

WHEREAS, the existing domestic fisheries have the capacity to harvest all surplus salmon stocks of Alaskan origin; and

WHEREAS, the commercial and subsistence fishermen of Western Alaska are dependent on chinook salmon resources as one of the mainstays of their economy and livelihood; and

WHEREAS, expanding recreational fisheries in Western Alaska are highly dependent on the chinook salmon resource; and

WHEREAS, the reported catch of chinook salmon in 1981 by the Japanese mothership fishery was much reduced over 1980, but it is not possible to completely verify the accuracy of these statistics; and

WHEREAS, harvests even in the 100,000 range if taken in areas of high Western Alaska chinook abundance would adversely impact inshore runs and harvests; and

WHEREAS, adequate salmon are available in areas other than the Central Bering Sea--including allowable fishing in our FCZ--for the mothership fishery to fill its quotas;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the U.S. section of the INPFC and the Federal Government pursue the elimination of effort by the mothership fishery in the Central Bering Sea; and

NOW THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that State and Federal scientists pursue examination of high seas salmon catch data to determine its accuracy and recommend methods of ensuring that the voluntary measures are being complied with; and

NOW THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that State and Federal scientists pursue study of the potential impact of high seas chinook harvest on inshore runs and economic viability of the inshore fishery.

ADOPTED: December 20, 1981

VOTE: 6-0

Nick Szabo
Chairman