

ALASKA BOARD OF FISHERIES
Findings on Creation of the
General District Management Plan for Bristol Bay
2004 – 230 - FB

Introduction

In response to requests by members of the public at the Alaska Board of Fisheries' (board) December 2003 Bristol Bay finfish meeting, the board asked the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (department) to draft a proposal to create a "General District" in response to a large forecasted run to Bristol Bay. Board proposal C was generated and circulated for further public and advisory committee comment before final board action. The board took final action to create the General District Management Plan for Bristol Bay during its February 15-26, 2004 meeting. The board took testimony from the public and advisory committees at both the December 2003 and February 2004 meetings.

At the December 2003 meeting, the department notified the board that the forecasted catch of sockeye salmon for the summer 2004 season is 34.7 million. There is a potential substantial underharvest due to limited processing capacity. Proposal C gives the department guidelines for conducting a fishery in an additional area of Bristol Bay. Proposal C also expires at the end of the 2004 salmon season (officially, December 31, 2004) since it is designed to respond to one season's forecast only.

The General District Management Plan

The General District fishing area is described in Proposal C. The commissioner may open and close fishing periods by emergency order, on or about June 7 through June 25, to drift gillnet fishing based on inseason run information. A harvest cap of 10 percent of the preseason sockeye salmon forecast (3.47 million) is specified for the General District, and 150 fathoms of gillnet with mesh size no larger than 5 ½ inches will be allowed. A CFEC permit holder must be registered in one of the five districts of Bristol Bay to fish in the General District. The 48-hour waiting period to transfer between the regular districts remains in effect, however, the waiting period does not apply to moving between the General District and the district in which the permit holder is registered. Allocation in the General District will be calculated based on the proportion of drift gillnet registrations in the five regular districts of Bristol Bay. The proportion of catch taken from the General District equal to the proportion of drift registrations by district will be attributed to the drift gear group in each district and be counted in the allocation plan for that district upon closure of the General District.

This type of management has been used in the past; in 1970 and in 1980 in response to large forecasted runs to Bristol Bay. The concept behind Proposal C is to harvest fish (10 percent of the forecasted harvest) sooner to prevent overwhelming the capacity of the processors. By allowing harvesting at the beginning of the season there will likely be enough processor capacity before the peak of the run. Fish harvested early would be of higher quality and would add value to the total salmon industry. The board reviewed information to show that the expected Kvichak River harvest is 6 to 6 ½ million sockeye salmon out of the total run, therefore there was little concern of harming the designated Kvichak sockeye salmon stock of concern. The department stated that the chances of impacting any one stock are minimal. The board directed the department to close the General District inseason if any indications of conservation problems are present.

Much of the board's discussion on proposal C centered around the department's ability to close the General District inseason if there are indicators that the sockeye returns will fall significantly below expectations. The strong forecast for 2004 was based largely on a strong showing of "jacks" (1-ocean fish) in the 2003 return, which is a good indicator of favorable returns for the following year. The department stated that the test fishery at Port Moller was expected to operate for the 2004 season, and would be able to monitor the age classes of fish taken in the test fishery. Should there be significant differences in the proportions of age classes in the test fishery from what is expected, or other indicators that the 2004 return is significantly weaker than expected, the department has the emergency order authority to close the General District and move the fishery back into the traditional districts.

The minority of the board was concerned that benefits of the expanded area would not stay within the region, and that subcomponents of stocks may be selectively overharvested. The minority believes that the department could deal with the issue by allowing earlier openings in each district as needed. The concept of opening each district early was discussed. The minority also expressed concerns about tax implications for the boroughs as the result of a potential change in district registration among fishermen.

The majority of the board determined that the General District plan will allow for the orderly harvest of surplus fish and improved product quality, under a management plan that is capable of being implemented and poses minimal risk to existing fisheries and conservation. The General District plan will have only minor allocative impacts because catches will be applied to the allocation plans that already exist for the regular districts. Potential tax consequences to boroughs, while not known for certain, are likely to be positive.

Summary

The board finds that the 2004 Bristol Bay General District salmon management plan is based upon the best available information, and will give the department additional tools for managing an unusually high forecasted return of sockeye salmon to Bristol Bay in 2004. The board notes that this regulation will be in effect for one salmon season in order to provide additional opportunity for fishermen to harvest salmon, adding value to the industry overall.

Approved: May 17, 2004
Vote: 4-2-1


Ed Dersham, Chair

Members voted as follows:

Andrews: Yes
Bouse: No
Dersham: Yes
Jensen: (Absent)
Morris: Yes
A. Nelson: Yes
R. Nelson: No