

PROPOSAL 254 - 5 AAC 35.521. Identification of Bering Sea Tanner crab. Amend the description of a hybrid Tanner crab so that hybrid designation is dependent upon the target Tanner crab fishery for which the vessel is validly registered, as follows:

5 AAC 35.521(c) should be amended to read: “For the purpose of 5 AAC 35.510(f)(3) and 5 AAC 35.520(b), a hybrid Tanner crab **is considered to be either a *C. bairdi* Tanner crab or a *C. opilio* Tanner crab dependent upon whichever target Tanner crab fishery the vessel is registered for and for which the vessel’s pot gear is actively rigged** [THAT CONFORMS TO THE DESCRIPTION IN (a) OF THIS SECTION IS CONSIDERED TO BE A C. BAIRDI TANNER CRAB, AND A HYBRID TANNER CRAB THAT DOES NOT CONFORM TO THAT DESCRIPTION IS CONSIDERED TO BE A C. OPILIO TANNER CRAB].”

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? *Chionoecetes opilio* crab and *Chionoecetes bairdi* crab naturally crossbreed with one another with their offspring displaying physical characteristics from both parents (species). It is understood that for the purposes of accurate catch accounting during both the directed *C. opilio* and *C. bairdi* fisheries, ADF&G needs to account for all crab landed during the course of commercial crab fishery operations. As the regulations under 5 AAC 35.521 are currently written, unless a Tanner crab displays the exact characteristics of a *C. bairdi* crab (red eyes and notched upper lip at two points with angular V-shaped cuts from an “M” shape), for catch accounting purposes all other *Chionoecetes* crab are considered to be *C. opilio* irrespective of whether they are a true *C. opilio* or a hybrid Tanner crab. Unfortunately, this identification regulation as currently written has the potential to result in violations for vessels that unintentionally retain hybrid Tanner crab during a season and/or in an area that is prohibited. The mixed physical characteristics make it extremely difficult to identify hybrid Tanner crab in a quick and efficient manner, especially during active fishing operations. This point is emphasized in a study by ADF&G and University of Maine researchers in which experts encountered significant difficulty in consistently correctly identifying hybrid *C. opilio* crab. This same study also noted difficulty on the part of observer trainees in correctly identifying hybrid *C. opilio*.

If this regulation is not addressed, vessel operators will likely receive unnecessary citations and penalties for possessing hybrid Tanner crabs for no conservation benefit. Hybrid Tanner crab are not accounted for in the stock assessment or harvest strategy calculations of either individual Tanner (*C. bairdi* or *C. opilio*) crab species. Because of this, the retention of hybrid Tanner crab can be viewed as a defacto conservation benefit (savings) for true *C. bairdi* and *C. opilio* crab and should not result in punishment. The proposed change to the regulatory language outlined below allows for the continued accounting of all crab landed without unnecessarily punishing vessels for the retention of crab that are not even considered as part of either *Chionoecetes* population.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers (HQ-F16-022)
