

PROPOSAL 5

5 AAC 28.230. Lawful gear for Prince William Sound Area.

Adopt a provision to close waters to specific groundfish gear types for rockfish conservation, as follows:

5 AAC 28.230 is amended by adding a new subsection to read:

...

(x) To conserve groundfish species, the commissioner may close areas to commercial fishing with specific gear types by emergency order.

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? The department has growing concerns about the status of rockfish stocks in Prince William Sound (PWS). Rockfish stock status is generally declining across most of the state and the department has restricted many directed rockfish fisheries to conserve these long-lived fish. In some areas of the state most of the rockfish harvest occurs as bycatch in fisheries targeting halibut or other groundfish species. The department has restricted state-managed commercial, sport, personal use, and subsistence fisheries for rockfish for conservation purposes. However, the department does not have authority to restrict the commercial halibut fishery to address rock fish bycatch concerns.

The *Prince William Sound Rockfish Management Plan* (5 AAC 28.265) establishes a rockfish guideline harvest level (GHL) of 150,000 lb and requires full retention of all rockfish caught when participating in a directed commercial groundfish or halibut fishery in the PWS Area. The plan also sets rockfish trip limits, by fishery, as a percentage of the round weight of the directed species on board the vessel. Any amount of rockfish that exceeds this bycatch limit is accounted for as overage and the proceeds from the rockfish overage sale are surrendered to the state.

To stay within the 2023 annual PWS rockfish GHL the department reduced rockfish bycatch limits and did not open the parallel Pacific cod season in PWS. The department further sought the assistance of participants in the halibut longline fishery to set gear away from aggregates of rockfish. This proved ineffective and the GHL was exceeded when harvest in the halibut longline fishery was still expected to continue for another 2 months. In October 2023, the board adopted an emergency regulation to delegate authority to the department to close commercial fishing with specific gear types in areas of high rockfish bycatch. That emergency regulation has expired. The department has determined that the authority to close these areas is necessary for conservation of the resource and prevent overharvest of a bycatch rock fish species.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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