



CITY OF
Saint Paul
ALASKA



Bering Sea Community Faces Uncertain Future

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Saint Paul Island, Alaska --- The announcement last week by the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADFG) that the Bering Sea snow crab and Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC) would be closed for the upcoming 2022-2023 season has sent this largely Aleut community of about 400 residents reeling. The closure of the snow crab fishery is the first in the 40-year history of the fishery and responds to ADFG scientists' concerns about the poor status of this stock.

Saint Paul Island's economy is approximately 90% dependent on the snow crab fishery. The activities associated with the harvesting and delivery of crab to the Trident Seafoods shore-side plant for processing is the primary source of municipal taxes and local revenues, underpins other fishery and business activities such as the local halibut fishery, and sustains the harbor and other fisheries-related infrastructure built on the island at considerable federal, state, and local expense since the phase-out of the commercial fur seal harvest in 1984. To make matters worse, the BBRKC fishery – a portion of which is delivered and processed on Saint Paul Island in the fall months – will remain closed for a second year in a row.

In normal years, the City of Saint Paul Island collects on average about \$2,700,000 in fisheries taxes. In 2023 it will only collect about \$200,000. "Without the taxes derived from crab processing our municipal government will struggle to support essential municipal services such as public safety, road maintenance, and emergency medical services," notes Saint Paul Island Mayor Jacob Mercurief. "We may need to cut municipal staff," said the Mayor.

The Central Bering Sea Fishermen's Association (CBSFA) is the local Community Development Quota (CDQ) group for Saint Paul Island, and is one of the primary engines of economic activity and investment in the community. CBSFA is allocated 20% of the total Bering Sea snow crab that is set aside for the CDQ program. The non-profit entity is one of the six groups that together make up the CDQ program, established in 1992 by federal statute to manage Bering Sea fisheries assets to promote social and economic development in the communities they serve.

In addition to harvesting CDQ allocations on its two crab vessels, CBSFA has made substantial additional investments in crab assets, both processing and harvesting shares in the rationalized crab management program in the Bering Sea, and is highly dependent on revenues from snow crab, Bristol Bay Red King Crab and other crab species.

With last week's complete closure of the snow crab and BBRKC fisheries, CBSFA will suffer another massive drop in revenues. Last year's 87% drop in the snow crab catch limit from 45 million pounds to 5.6 million pounds, caused a dramatic 65% drop in CBSFA's total revenues.

The catastrophic closures this season will result in 2023 crab revenues less than half of 2022's, and less than 1/6th of the five-year average. The projected crab revenue from 2023 reflects a 91% drop from 2021, the last year with a healthy snow crab fishery.

"This disaster will make it very challenging for CBSFA to fulfill CDQ program objectives for Saint Paul Island, including funding many of the community infrastructure, educational, research, and social programs CBSFA supports," said CBSFA COO Ray Melovidov.



And Saint Paul Island is not alone; crab-dependent communities in Alaska fear that with only a small Bairdi crab season ahead, there may be insufficient crab poundage to keep existing crab processing capacity engaged. Depending on the duration of the snow crab and red king crab downturns, this could be devastating to communities such as Saint Paul Island that host large-capacity processing operations.

As processing costs and availability in Saint Paul Island are affected, it also affects the processing availability for halibut, the other major fishery that takes place around Saint Paul Island – and has a cascading effect on that fishery and on the community residents that participate in it.

With CBSFA and Saint Paul Island and the rest of the crab industry and crab-dependent communities struggling to maintain viability, stakeholders last week asked the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) – which manages the crab resource in conjunction with the State of Alaska – to consider actions to help crab stocks stabilize and recover. Given the extreme conservation concerns expressed by the State of Alaska and the Council, the management bodies are now expected to focus on the issues that could compromise recovery of BBRKC and snow crab stocks.

“Climate change and the changing environment in the Bering Sea are clearly impacting the ecosystem overall, putting significant strain on crab stocks. CBSFA will remain diligent in working with the NPFMC and ADFG as they develop a rebuilding plan for opilio, and protections for molting and mating BBRKC,” said Jeff Kauffman, CEO of CBSFA’s wholly owned subsidiary, Saint Paul Fishing Company.

Managers and scientists must further identify and protect the centers of crab abundance, and support meaningful rebuilding measures such as habitat protections for king crab. Stakeholders have advocated for Council consideration of management that specifically protects molting and mating crab from fishing impacts, adjusts the minimum bycatch limit at low snow crab abundance, and estimates unobserved fishing mortality using best available information.

All sectors are subject to Section 304(e) of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), which requires consideration of the “needs of fishing communities” and allocations of “both overfishing restrictions and recovery benefits fairly and equitably among sectors of the fishery” while action is considered and taken to rebuild the affected crab fisheries.

To help preserve their unique Bering Sea community, the City plans to request a commercial fishery failure declaration under provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act; if approved by the Secretary of Commerce and funded by Congress, disaster funding would help keep Saint Paul Island’s lights on while the community works toward developing a new economy – and waits for a rebound in crab stocks.

“God has given us a privileged location amidst some of the richest commercial fisheries in the world,” noted Mayor Mercurief. “We are a resilient community and have been through crises before. With some help, I hope that my people will be able to continue making a living from the resources of the Bering Sea as we have done for thousands of years.”

For further information contact:

Ray Melovidov, COO, Central Bering Sea Fishermen’s Association, Office phone 907 546-2597
Jeff Kauffman, CEO, Saint Paul Fishing Company, Cell phone 907-952-2476
Phillip A. Zavadil, City Manager, City of Saint Paul, Office phone 907 341-3994

Additional information

History

Saint Paul and the neighboring Pribilof Island of Saint George are world-renowned for being home to the largest colonies of northern fur seals as well as key nesting sites and rookeries for hundreds of seabird species. In order to harvest valuable fur seal pelts, the Russians established a colony on Saint Paul in 1788, transporting Aleuts from the Aleutian Chain and enslaving them in pursuit of this valuable resource. This operation, known as the commercial fur seal harvest, was taken over by Americans in 1867 after the purchase of Alaska by the United States. Administered by the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, and subsequently NMFS, the operation was managed profitably, at the cost of what was essentially captive Aleut labor, until it was phased-out in 1984.

Since then, with the support of the Alaska congressional delegation, federal, state and local dollars poured into the community to develop a harbor and other infrastructure necessary for a stable, self-sufficient, fisheries-related economy pursuant to the direction of the Fur Seal Act Amendments of 1983. Given its proximity to the crab grounds, Saint Paul become one of the nation's preeminent crab fishing communities starting from the late 1980's. The effort succeeded until recently.

Crab Rationalization Program

The snow crab and Bristol Bay red king crab fisheries are part of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Crab Rationalization Program, created in 2005 and intended to create economic stability and improve safety. This is the first rationalized fishery in the country to suffer this magnitude of fishery collapse and correlated economic harm. On a larger scale, with over a \$200M loss in crab ex-vessel value last year alone, the effects are devastating to the entire crab fleet and ripple through Alaska's communities, processors, support businesses, and even schools, affecting thousands of people.

Conservation efforts

The regulatory area known as the Red King Crab Savings Area (RKCSA) in Bristol Bay has long been identified as important habitat for red king crab, and Council information indicates that trawl fishing effort has recently increased in that area. Managers could look further at the impacts of closing that area to additional fishing effort to address habitat and bycatch concerns. Consideration could also be given to dynamic closed areas protecting those identified with repeated high bycatch rates, but that are not currently in the RKCSA.