



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau Alaska 99802-1668

C1 NMFS Ltr re PIBKC overfishing 9-29-16
OCTOBER 2016

September 29, 2016

Mr. Dan Hull, Chair
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, Alaska 99601

Dear Chairman Hull:

This letter provides notification that Pribilof Islands blue king crab (*Paralithodes platypus*) experienced overfishing in 2016. Total catch for Pribilof Islands blue king crab in the crab fishing year, from July 2015 to June 2016, was 1.18 metric tonnes (mt), exceeding the overfishing level (OFL) of 1.16 mt.

The Pribilof Islands blue king crab stock remains overfished and available information does not show signs of rebuilding. Directed fishing for Pribilof Islands blue king crab has been closed since 1999. This stock has been under a rebuilding plan since 2004. The Council and NMFS revised the rebuilding plan in 2014. The Pribilof Islands Habitat Conservation Zone (PIHCZ) is closed to trawl gear and pot gear to protect blue king crab habitat and minimize bycatch in the Bering Sea groundfish fisheries. The PIHCZ encompasses the core area of the Pribilof Islands blue king crab stock.

Bycatch has been well below the OFL and acceptable biological catch (ABC) in recent years. Most bycatch occurs in the Bering Sea groundfish fisheries. Bycatch of Pribilof Islands blue king crab increased during the 2015/2016 crab fishing year in the hook-and-line Pacific cod fishery inside the PIHCZ and in the non-pelagic trawl fishery outside the PIHCZ. This increase in Pribilof Islands blue king crab bycatch in the Bering Sea groundfish fishery, along with a small amount of bycatch in the Tanner crab fishery, caused overfishing to occur during the 2015/2016 crab fishing year. Additional information on the OFL, ABC, and bycatch of Pribilof Islands blue king crab is provided in the 2016 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for the Pribilof Islands Blue King Crab Fishery of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Regions.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires the Council and NMFS to immediately end overfishing and prevent overfishing from occurring. We propose that we monitor Pribilof Islands blue king crab bycatch inseason during the groundfish fisheries. If Pribilof Islands blue king crab bycatch approaches the ABC during a crab fishing year, we will use the inseason management authority at 50 CFR 679.25 to publish a notification in the Federal Register specifying inseason adjustments to prevent overfishing of Pribilof Islands blue king crab. With this flexible approach, we will be able to make precise inseason closures that apply to



vessels fishing for Bering Sea groundfish with bottom contact gear when necessary to prevent overfishing. We use this same approach to prevent overfishing of groundfish stocks.

We look forward to working with the Council to ensure that overfishing does not occur for Pribilof Islands blue king crab.

Sincerely,



James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region