



PRESS RELEASE

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NOAA denies emergency crab protections

NOAA Fisheries announced today their denial of Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers request for emergency conservation measures to protect Bristol Bay red king crab (BBRKC), a fishery closed for the second year in a row. The request came after new information provided to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and NOAA Fisheries in 2022 showed pelagic or midwater trawl gear is actually on the ocean floor 40-100% of the time. This occurs over large areas of the Bering Sea where nets larger than football fields are dragging on the bottom and harming crab and habitat. What's worse is that this damaging fishing is happening at times when crab are soft shell and vulnerable, when they're molting and mating between January through June, and the pollock industry has increased their fishing effort in areas known to be important to red king crab over a period of time that corresponds to the decline of the stock.

The proposed emergency action would have provided immediate temporary protections for Alaska crab while the Council and agency work through a longer public process for permanent solutions. The agency's analysis from the December Council meeting even states, *"Given what is currently known about the stock status of BBRKC, the intent of the [Red King Crab Savings Area] RKCSA, how gear is currently operating in the RKCSA and that crab performance standards may not be working as intended, this analysis concludes that a closure to the RKCSA would provide habitat benefits through reduced bottom contact by trawl gear and potential RKC savings."*

Crabbers are dismayed that the agency denied this emergency request for temporary conservation measures when their denial letter admits that it would have provided benefits to crab. It's unbelievable. We have science and data proving this action would help crab at a time when the stock needs it. The agency chose not to use the best available science to help a struggling crab resource and a dwindling industry and communities even though the action would not harm other fishing sectors nor increase bycatch of species of concern like salmon that already have bycatch protections in place. At what point is the government responsible for taking actions to keep US fisheries sustainable? Because we're not seeing it for crab. And if our situation isn't urgent and alarming with closed fisheries and collapsed stocks, then what is?

Even more troubling, the Council in December halted consideration of a permanent measure that would follow the intent of the current crab closed area. At the same meeting, they also stripped the habitat protections out of every crab action in front of them even though crab are a benthic species where habitat is clearly an important component, especially during stock recovery. Then, the Council increased the pollock harvest which will increase impacts and harm on crab and crab habitat. With climate change, growing uncertainty, growing fishing pressure from large industrial pollock and other fisheries, we need to figure out how to better manage Alaska's fisheries. Not later...we need it now. This is urgent and warrants emergency action or we risk losing the sustainability of Alaska's fisheries. If what Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers proposed isn't the answer, then someone needs to bring the answer forward quick because status quo isn't working.

Amidst incredible frustration with a lack of action by the Council and NOAA Fisheries to conserve crab stocks, crabbers are pleased with the recent fishery disaster declarations and appropriations. Congress and the Secretary of Commerce recognize the magnitude of what the crab industry is facing, and we appreciate their action in record time. Once received, that financial relief will be helpful to weather the crisis. Similarly, NOAA Fisheries and Alaska Department of Fish and Game have provided funds for urgent crab research that will start in March and could help inform future management decisions. These funds for financial relief and research are important parts of crisis response but we must also make sure we are addressing the core of the issue- responsive management actions to help crab stocks recover.

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The Alaska Bering Sea Crabbers is a trade association representing independent crab harvesters who commercially fish for king, snow (opilio), and bairdi (Tanner) crab with environmentally friendly pot gear in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Crab Rationalization Program. There are approximately 60 vessels and 350 fishermen that participate in the fisheries, including communities around the Bering Sea, Kodiak, Anchorage, Homer, and the Pacific Northwest.

