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RESPONSIBLE  
**COOPERATION**





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# RESPONSIBLE COOPERATION





The Alaska Seafood Cooperative (AKSC) is a group of “catcher processor” fishing companies that have banded together in order to improve the management of Bering Sea flatfish and other non-pollock ground fisheries.

The Bering Sea – which covers more than two million square kilometers of Pacific Ocean territory – accommodates a rich and

dynamic ecosystem, and has long presented opportunity for fishermen in pursuit of the wild fish demanded by markets throughout America. Over the years, however, the competition over that opportunity has generated concerns related to overfishing and adverse impact on sensitive ecosystems.

To moderate the potential impact of that







competition, government agencies such as the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) have adopted precautionary management principles. These principles have restricted the harvest limits of select species, as well as the combined groundfish harvest limits in the Bering Sea and neighboring Aleutian islands.

Before the advent of the AKSC in 2008, those limits created a disadvantageous system for competitive fisheries, whereby the

government would open a target allocation for a prohibited species, usually halibut or crab. Upon reaching the target allocation, fishing operations were brought to an immediate halt. In the course of fishing, the fishery might avoid capture of other species, but some are always caught – this is known as bycatch, and bycatch is required to be discarded.

Bycatch reduction has been a persistent goal of bodies like the NPFMC and NMFS. To achieve those reductions, they helped devel-

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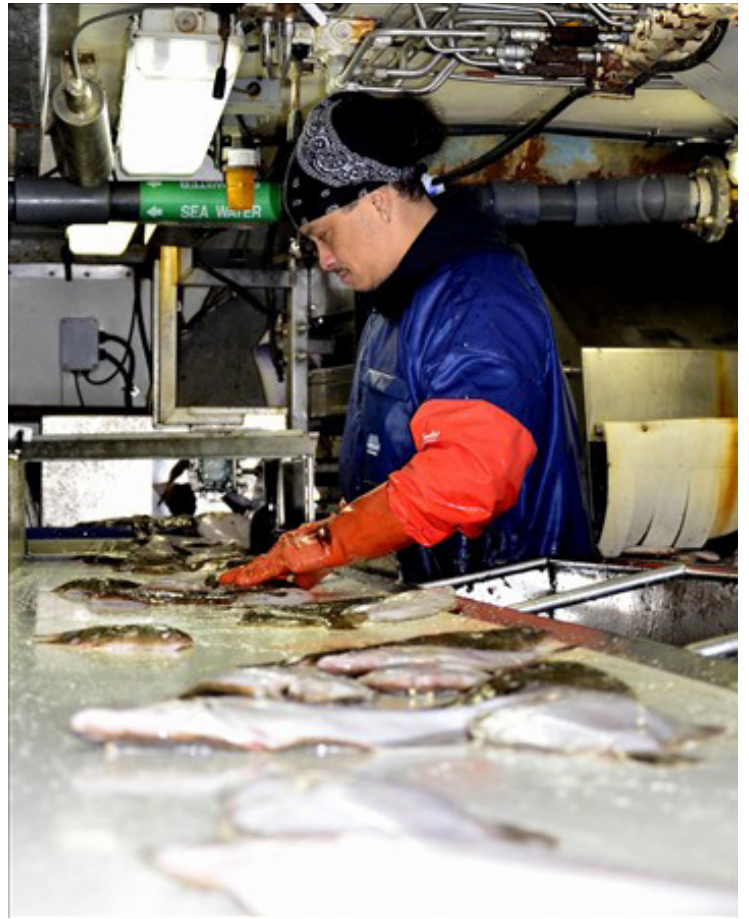


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op and institute Amendment 80 to the Bering Sea Fishery Management Plan.

According to Jason Anderson, General Manager of AKSC, Amendment 80 took roughly 10 years to develop. What it does is allow eligible and likeminded flatfish vessels to form and own cooperatives such as the AKSC.

AKSC, like all cooperatives, is responsible for its own target catch and bycatch. Every year, they apply for a permit that's based on the number of people in the cooperative and the history of different target species. They bring the resulting quota to the cooperative to be allocated to the individual vessels.

Anderson said the AKSC has resulted in lower bycatch rates and allowed members to fish more cleanly and efficiently. Now, instead of prema-

turely reaching target allocations and being shut down for months at a time, members are essentially fishing from when the season begins, all the way to the end of the year.

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Amendment 80,” Anderson said. “It was set up to reduce bycatch, and it’s done that here.”

## CATCHER PROCESSORS

The AKSC is comprised mostly of companies involved in the Bering Sea flatfish fishery industry. Members include Fishermen’s Finest, Inc., Iquique US, Ocean Peace, O’Hara Corporation, and United States Seafood – all of which are “catcher processor” companies.

Catcher processors – also called at-sea processing vessels – catch, process, and freeze groundfish within two hours of being removed from the sea, ensuring high quality, fresh product. Anderson describes a catcher-

processor as essentially having a “factory on-board”.

“The net comes up onboard and all of the catch goes down into the factory where it’s sampled by an observer,” he explained. “There are two observers on each boat, and there is a long litany of monitoring protocols in place that rely on both human and technology resources.”

The factory processes in these vessels involve running the fish through a saw blade to cut the head off, then degutting the fish, all before freezing them in frozen blocks, which are then shipped off to different places.






AKSC members operate catcher processors of 110 to 295 feet. Their fisheries include many species of sole and flounder including yellowfin sole, rock sole, rex sole, flathead sole, arrowtooth flounder, and Alaska plaice.

Additionally, AKSC vessels harvest Pacific cod, Atka mackerel, Pacific Ocean Perch, and several other species encountered in the rich waters off Alaska – an area which annually supplies more than half of the country's total yield of wild fish.

The AKSC's job is making sure their members' operations run smoothly, while also working on programs and projects that ad-



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dress the issues and challenges facing their industry.

## THE HALIBUT ISSUE

One of the current issues facing the AKSC is the declining halibut bio-mass. The International Pacific Halibut Commission (IHPHC) is the body responsible for managing the directed halibut fishery, and they have done some research that shows halibut bio-mass is steadily shrinking over time.

“There is a lot of political pressure on us to reduce halibut mortality beyond what we’ve already done,” Anderson said. “That’s one of the big things we’re working on right now.”

Currently, the NHPFC is deliberating on

making cuts to halibut allocations for a number of sectors, including AKSC’s. Anderson predicted those cuts will be significant.

“Knowing that, we’ve been working on a couple of things,” he reported. “The fishermen have developed a ‘reverse hall way excluder.’ There are only two of these in the world, one in Newfoundland and one in Denmark. It’s a machine that passes water through it and they can build these mini models of nets and watch water go through, and they’ve figured out ways to mechanically exclude halibut from the catch.”

“In some fisheries, halibut are bigger than target catch,” he explained. “And this system – which also uses halibut behaviour





compared to other target fish behaviour – excludes them from the catch mechanically. That’s reduced our halibut bycatch by quite a bit.”

The other main challenge AKSC is working on is reducing halibut mortality during the sampling process. According to Anderson, roughly 80 per cent of halibut die during that stage.

“We’re trying to figure out a way to provide accurate accounting of halibut bycatch and get those halibut in the water sooner by sorting them on deck,” he explained. “It’s important to have protocols in place to get an accurate catch counting, and we’re working with an agency in figuring out how to do that and

get halibut back in the water.”

“There’s a lot of political pressure on all groups to reduce halibut bycatch,” he continued. “This is an international issue because Canada has a portion of the halibut resource and the USA has a portion of the halibut resource, and it becomes fairly politicized rather quickly.”

The challenge, Anderson said, is that fishermen have made a lot of improvements to reduce halibut bycatch already. Many of them feel like further incremental improvements will be small, with the exception of deck sorting – but even that comes with its own specific challenges.





“On the surface, deck sorting reduces halibut mortality by quite a bit but it’s not available all the time,” he explained. “It’s something that you can only do with certain fisheries and during certain weather conditions, and captains have to be able to use their discretion.”

“Captains on these boats have incredible responsibility – they’re responsible for the safety of their crews, responsible for making money, responsible for abiding by a long list of regulatory compliances, and they’re making decisions on what sort of catch they’re

going to get,” Anderson continued. “We’re a multi-species fishery, and our captains are trying to maximize the value of each haul and minimize the amount of halibut they’re getting. They need to achieve a balance between every haul in terms of catch composition. It’s a lot of pressure.”

## LONG TERM VIEW

While the AKSC is facing several significant challenges, Anderson acknowledged that they are also fortunate to be based where they are.





“In Alaska, we like to brag that we have the best managed resources in the world,” he said. “We have good scientists, and the NPFMC relies heavily on the science. We’re fairly conservatively managed. We’re lucky to be in the Bering Sea and Alaska, because we have such a healthy resource.”

“Things are very healthy and we have a productive ecosystem,” he added. “We have a lot of forward thinking people who like to make decisions based on conservations and precautionary principles. There are a lot of people who are in it for the long term, not short

term gains.” Moving forward, Anderson predicted that the authorities will continue to take a long term view, and Alaska will likely continue to have some of the best managed resources in the world. As far as ASKC is concerned, however, he said the future is “a little up in the air” while the NHPFC deliberates making cuts to halibut allocations.

“It depends on how the Council acts on this halibut issue,” Anderson said. “Depending on what happens, people are going to be looking at different solutions.”





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