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## Fishery managers start a process to tighten salmon bycatch rules in Alaska's Bering Sea

By **Yereth Rosen, Alaska Beacon**  
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The North Pacific Fishery Management Council has launched a formal evaluation of new measures aimed at reducing the number of chum caught in pollock trawl nets



*Strips of chum salmon hang on a drying rack on Aug. 22, 2007. Residents of Indigenous communities in Western and Interior Alaska have long depended on chum salmon, and declining runs have caused distress in those communities. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council has advanced a set of proposed new rules to limit*

Federal fishery managers took steps on Tuesday to impose new rules to prevent Alaska chum salmon from being scooped into nets used to catch Bering Sea pollock, an industrial-scale fishery that makes up the nation's largest single-species commercial seafood harvest.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council advanced a [suite of new protections](#) intended to combat the pollock trawlers' salmon bycatch, the term for the incidental catch of unintended species. Proposed steps in the package include numeric caps on total chum salmon bycatch, with varying allocations for different sectors of the pollock fleet; protective limits in corridors known to be used by salmon migrating through the ocean back to Western Alaska freshwater spawning areas; and provisions that would link new limits in the ocean to real-time salmon counts and conditions in the rivers.

The action followed years of complaints about ocean bycatch of chum salmon at a time when runs in Western Alaska rivers have dwindled, becoming so low at times that no fishing was allowed.

The council's [meeting](#) in Anchorage, which started on Feb. 3 and wrapped up with the vote on Tuesday, was devoted almost exclusively to the [problem of bycatch](#) and its effects of chum salmon runs in the Yukon and Kuskokwim river systems.

The vote to advance the protective package followed days of sometimes-emotional testimony from residents of rural Western and Interior Alaska villages who have long depended on chum salmon – one of the five species of Pacific salmon – as a food staple.

Residents who testified described the anemic salmon runs as a crisis threatening family well-being, local economies and Indigenous cultures and identities.

In some of the testimony at the meeting, representatives of the [Association of Village Council Presidents](#), a Bethel-based consortium of Western Alaska tribes, were among those who described the impacts of the salmon crashes on the lives of Indigenous people.

Nels Alexie, a traditional chief for the association, phrased the issue succinctly. He was at the meeting “because of my traditional stomach,” he told the council on Saturday. “Quickly, would you please give me back my chums and my king salmon?”

Vivian Korthuis, chief executive officer of the organization, made similar comments.

“We are not separate from our rivers or the ocean. We are salmon people. It is our cultural identity and our way of life,” she said in her testimony on Saturday.



*The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, meeting in Anchorage on Feb. 11, 2025, reviews alternatives for new rules to reduce bycatch of Alaska-origin chum salmon in the Bering Sea pollock fishery. The council's meeting, which ran over a week, was mostly devoted to the bycatch issue. (Photo by Yereth Rosen/Alaska Beacon)*

The [long-running debate](#) over bycatch has, at times, pitted the interests of Indigenous residents along the river systems against those of the companies and Alaska coastal communities dependent on the Bering Sea [pollock harvest](#). Pollock is the [nation's largest](#) single-species commercial seafood harvest; the [trawl equipment](#) used to catch those fish features large nets that are towed through midwater areas above the seafloor.

Council members, as they prepared to vote on Tuesday, said they got the message from the Alaskans who depend on salmon from the river systems.

“What I heard loud and clear was the council should be doing everything it can to help Western Alaska salmon get back to the rivers,” said council member Rachel Baker, who is also [deputy commissioner](#) of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Although the specifics have been months in the making, the council's vote on Tuesday was in some ways an early part of the process.

The vote does not put any specific new protections into place. Rather, it launches a detailed evaluation of the numerous bycatch-reduction tools proposed in the different alternatives and how they could work in combination. Once its staff members complete that evaluation, the council is expected to vote as early as December on what members deem to be the best blend of new protections for Western Alaska chum salmon.

If the council gives its approval in coming months, the new bycatch-reduction rules would go into effect in 2027, though parts of the fishing industry might follow some of those rules voluntarily in 2026.

The long rollout reflects the requirement that fishery managers abide by federal laws and the environmental impact statement process.

"It's a long process and it's a bit of a grind, but I think we'll get through it and come out with something that is meaningful in the end," said council member Anne Vanderhoeven.

Advocates of the Indigenous communities dependent on Western Alaska chum salmon said Tuesday's council action was a victory, despite the wait for any specific new rules to take effect in the ocean.

"Sometimes small steps are a win," Michael Williams Sr., a Yup'ik leader from the village of Akiak, said just after the meeting adjourned.





*Eva Burk, a member of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's advisory panel and a tribal representative, and Mike William Sr., a Yup'ik leader from Akiak, stand outside a meeting room on Feb. 11, 2025, just after the council adjourned a week-long meeting devoted mostly to the problem of salmon bycatch. Burk and Williams said the council's action, which advances several proposed new bycatch-reduction rules, was a positive step for salmon-dependent residents of Western and Interior Alaska. (Photo by Yereth Rosen/Alaska Beacon)*

He likened the progress at the council to the way the [Kuskokwim River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission](#) a decade ago started work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to jointly manage salmon runs on that river. That co-management was a necessary response to reduced runs, said Williams, [one of the leaders](#) of the commission.

Eva Burk, a Dene Athabascan from Nenana and a [member of the council's advisory panel](#), said the options for protective corridors in the Bering Sea were especially important. Tribes proposed that idea, and the concept relies on traditional knowledge, she said.

"It's been known for 100 years that this is a passage for Western Alaska chum, so we just wanted that corridor option to be fleshed out," she said.

Those corridors are needed to rebuild stocks that use the Western Alaska rivers, she said. "In the changing environmental conditions that people are pointing out, it's important to have genetic diversity," she said. "We need these fish."

Since 1991, the amount of chum salmon netted annually as bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock fishery has ranged from a few thousand to a high of about 700,000 in 2005, according to the council's [analysis](#). Bycatch hit its second highest total in 2021, when 545,901 chum salmon were incidentally caught in trawl gear, according to the analysis. Bycatch was reduced substantially in the following years' pollock harvests and was recorded at 35,125 fish last year, according to the analysis.

Genetic analysis consistently shows that most chum salmon netted as bycatch in the Bering Sea pollock harvest are [not Alaska-origin](#) but [produced by Asian hatcheries](#), though Alaska-origin fish tend to cluster in particular locations.

Additionally, the salmon crashes in Western Alaska river systems have been blamed by scientists primarily on climate change and related factors rather than bycatch, including [successive marine heatwaves](#).

Council member Jon Kurland, who is Alaska regional director for the National Marine Fisheries Service, referenced that scientific consensus on Tuesday.

"I don't think there's any other fishery issue in Alaska that so powerfully demonstrates the challenges that we're all facing from climate change," Kurland said. That is not something the council can reverse, he said: "The council cannot stop climate change."

Still, bycatch is identified as a factor that can also reduce returns to the river systems, and it is something the council can address, he said. The message from public testimony was that "every salmon matters to in-river communities," he said.

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