

Plan would ban U.S. commercial fishing in Arctic Ocean

February 6 2009, By Wesley Loy

Federal fishery regulators Thursday approved an unprecedented plan to ban U.S. commercial fishing in the Arctic Ocean.

The Anchorage-based North Pacific Fishery Management Council spent two years developing the Arctic plan in response to climate change and the rapid retreat of sea ice in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas along Alaska's northern coast.

Some scientists and fishing industry players say it's conceivable that commercially valuable seafood species such as pollock or crab populations could expand in the Arctic, which could draw fishing fleets.

So far, no fishing of any major scale occurs in the Arctic, and the few surveys of fish stocks there don't show large populations.

Still, the council, meeting in Seattle this week, decided to write an Arctic Fishery Management Plan to control commercial fisheries should they develop.

The council, made up of mostly government and industry representatives from Alaska, Oregon and Washington, oversees the state's major offshore fisheries in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. It voted 11-0 in favor of the Arctic plan.

The plan essentially bans commercial fishing across the entire Arctic region from the Canadian border down to the Bering Strait.

The area could be opened in the future, however, based on research showing that fisheries could be conducted sustainably and without harm to an ecosystem populated with sea birds, seals, whales and other species important to Native residents as subsistence food.

Fishing industry groups and environmentalists alike hailed the council's action to impose strong management measures before any large-scale fisheries begin.

"Climate change is having a significant effect on the Arctic, opening previously ice-covered waters and drawing cold-water species farther north," said Dave Benton of the Juneau-based Marine Conservation Alliance, which represents fishing companies, processors and ports. "The council's action to close these waters as a precautionary measure gives us the opportunity to conduct the scientific review necessary to develop a plan for how sustainable fisheries might be conducted in the Arctic in the future."

Chris Krenz, a marine scientist with the conservation group Oceana, said the council deserves praise for getting out in front of commercial fisheries with a management plan.

"Really, this is a great example for other nations to look at in terms of how they manage their fisheries as well as other industries such as shipping," Krenz said. "It's planning for the future rather than waiting for problems to occur."

Commercial harvest of common polar species such as the small Arctic cod could hurt the many sea birds, seals and other species that feed heavily on these fish and that in turn are important for subsistence, he said.

How the Arctic Ocean is to be used as global warming continues is the

subject of intense international debate. The retreat of sea ice has spawned interest in the Arctic's potential not only for fisheries but for shipping and energy development.

Last year Congress passed a resolution calling on the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway and other nations to negotiate how to manage migratory and transboundary fish stocks in the Arctic Ocean.

The North Pacific Council's action Thursday is subject to final approval by the U.S. commerce secretary.

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Citation: Plan would ban U.S. commercial fishing in Arctic Ocean (2009, February 6) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-02-commercial-fishing-arctic-ocean.html>

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