

Commerce secretary approves Arctic fisheries plan

August 21 2009, By MARY PEMBERTON , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The nation's secretary of commerce has approved a plan that would prohibit an expansion of commercial fishing in the Arctic, at least until more is known about the area.

Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke on Thursday approved the Arctic Fishery Management Plan, which was prompted by changes in the Arctic that have come with global warming and the loss of sea ice.

Locke said the goal now is to come up with a sustainable fishing plan that will not harm the overall health of the fragile Arctic ecosystem.

"As Arctic sea ice recedes due to climate change, there is increasing interest in commercial fishing in Arctic waters," Locke said in a statement. "This plan takes a precautionary approach to any development of commercial fishing in an area where there has been none in the past."

A report released in April predicted that within 30 years the area covered by summer [sea ice](#) will decline from about 2.8 million square miles to 620,000 square miles.

Locke's decision came a day before Obama administration officials are scheduled to conduct a public hearing in Anchorage on the nation's [ocean](#) policy. A task force is developing a recommendation for a policy that officials say ensures protection, maintenance and restoration of oceans, coasts and the Great Lakes.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, which oversees the management of fish in federal waters, adopted the Arctic Fishery Management Plan in February. The plan then underwent public review before Locke's approval.

The plan has been hailed by environmentalists and industry representatives alike.

Fishermen want to avoid what happened in the mid-1980s when it was every nation for itself and the pollock stocks were overfished in the Bering Sea and collapsed, said Dave Benton, executive director of the Marine Conservation Alliance, an industry group that represents the seafood, groundfish and crab industries in Alaska.

The plan will help the United States work more cooperatively with the Canadians and the Russians on a joint decision about fishing in the Arctic, Benton said.

"This time we want to get ahead of the curve," he said.

The plan would prohibit industrial fishing in nearly 200,000 square miles of U.S. waters in the Beaufort and Chukchi seas until researchers can gather sufficient information on fish and the Arctic marine environment. It identifies Arctic cod, saffron cod and snow crab as species that likely would be targeted by commercial fishermen.

The plan would govern all commercial fishing for all stocks of finfish and shellfish in federal waters in Arctic waters off Alaska, except Pacific salmon and Pacific halibut because they are managed under other authorities. It would not affect fisheries for salmon, whitefish and shellfish in Alaskan waters near the Arctic coastline. The proposed plan would not affect Arctic subsistence fishing or hunting.

The plan also outlines rules for any new Arctic fisheries that could be approved in the future. Among them is a provision that fishermen will be required to keep records to help determine catch, production, price and other information necessary for conservation and management.

Also under the plan, fishermen may be required to carry fisheries observers on board to verify catch and discard numbers, among other requirements.

Locke said the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Service will establish procedures before approving any future fisheries.

Chris Krenz, arctic project manager for the conservation group Oceana, said this is the first time a management plan has been put in place before fishing has been allowed in an area. The approach comes, he said, with the realization that fisheries have an impact.

"This is the type of approach that will lead to sustainability," he said.

Krenz said he expects the plan to be in place and enforceable by late this year or early next year.

On the Net:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/arctic/>

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