



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

October 22, 2018

Mr. Simon Kinneen, Chair
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Chairman Kinneen:

This letter provides notification that the Saint Matthew Island blue king crab (*Paralithodes platypus*) status has been changed to overfished. However, it is not subject to overfishing. Total catch for Saint Matthew Island blue king crab in the crab fishing year, from July 2017 to June 2018, was 50 metric tonnes (mt), which is below the overfishing level of 120 mt.

The blue king crab fishery in the Saint Matthew Island district began in 1977 with harvest peaking in 1983. However, harvests began to decline in the late 1980s. In September 1999, NMFS declared the Saint Matthew Island blue king crab overfished and the fishery was closed from 1999 to 2008. A rebuilding plan was approved in 2000 by the Council which resulted in the Alaska Board of Fisheries adopting a revised harvest strategy, gear modification measures to reduce bycatch of females and juveniles in directed crab fisheries, and a 0-3 nm closure area around Saint Matthew Island, Hall Island, and Pinnacles Island to all groundfish and crab fishing. In 2008 the Council recommended and NMFS approved Amendment 89 to the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Management Area which closed the waters surrounding Saint Matthew Island to all non-pelagic trawl gear due to its potential effects on blue king crab habitat. This closure went into place in 2009. The stock was declared rebuilt in 2009 and the fishery reopened later that year. The fishery remained open for the next three years with modest harvests, but large declines in the NMFS trawl survey estimate of stock abundance raised concerns about the health of the stock. As a result the fishery was again closed during the 2013/14 season. The fishery reopened in the 2014/15 and 2015/16 season, but has been closed for the 2016/17 season. With the directed blue king crab fishery closed, the only source of catch is Saint Matthew Island blue king crab bycatch in the Bering Sea groundfish fisheries and the other crab fisheries. Most bycatch occurs in the Bering Sea groundfish fisheries.

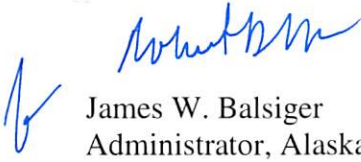
The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) requires that the Council and NMFS prevent overfishing from occurring. We propose that we monitor Saint Matthew Islands blue king crab bycatch inseason during the groundfish fisheries. In addition, NMFS proposes to work closely with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to ensure any blue king crab taken in the Saint Matthew Island District in other directed crab fisheries be included in the inseason bycatch amounts. If Saint Matthew Island blue king crab bycatch approaches the acceptable biological catch during a crab fishing year, we will use the inseason management



authority at 50 CFR 679.25 to publish a notification in the Federal Register specifying inseason adjustments to prevent overfishing of Saint Matthew Islands blue king crab. With this flexible approach, we will be able to make precise inseason closures that apply to vessels fishing for Bering Sea groundfish with bottom contact gear when necessary to prevent overfishing. We use this same approach to prevent overfishing of groundfish stocks. In addition the MSA requires that a rebuilding plan be developed and put in place within two years of the stock being declared overfished. The rebuilding plan should specify a time period for rebuilding the fishery, not to exceed ten years.

We look forward to working with the Council to develop a rebuilding plan and to ensure that overfishing does not occur for Saint Matthew Island blue king crab.

Sincerely,



James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region