

THE BERING SEA

ALASKA POLLOCK

It's all about feeding fish-stick nation

No place off America's coasts produces as much fish as the Bering Sea. And no fish is more plentiful in America's harvests than the Alaska pollock. Pollock is deep-fried and sold as "Fillet-O-Fish" sandwiches at McDonald's or frozen fish sticks. It is minced into a bland white substance and sold as surimi or imitation crab meat. And in winter, pollock is harvested for its roe, a delicacy in Japan.

Marine mammals in Alaska's Bering Sea also feast on pollock. Indeed, the pollock's scientific name, *Theragra chalcogramma*, means "beast food" in Greek.

The Council says there's no reason to worry about whether the pollock harvest can be sustained; it estimates that about 10 million tons of pollock are swimming around in the U.S. portion of the Bering Sea. The Bering Sea fishing fleet catches a little less than 1.5 million tons of pollock every year, or about 15 percent of the stock. That's enough to:

- Feed 300,000 Steller sea lions for a year.

- Fill 100 million 10-county boxes of Gorton's Crunchy Gold frozen fish fillets.

- Make 1 billion deep-fried fish sandwiches.

Scientists have long been amazed at the abundance of pollock in the Bering Sea. "Alaskan pollock ... is excessively abundant throughout the Bering Sea, swimming near the surface and furnishing the great part of the food of the fur seal. It reaches a length of 3 feet and is doubtless a good food-fish," David Starr Jordan and B.W. Evermann observed in 1902.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, which recommends rules for the pollock fishery, uses a formula that does not account for the food needs of marine mammals when it makes decisions. Its critics say it will have to reduce the catch to account for those needs.

In 2004, the Marine Stewardship Council certified the Bering Sea pollock fishery "sustainable," so long as it meets certain conditions. While MSC claims it is independent, it has tight historical ties with the Alaska seafood industry. MSC was co-founded by

Unilever, a leading manufacturer of products made from Alaska pollock, such as fish sticks. MSC's other co-founder, the World Wildlife Fund, is the only conservation group working on ocean issues in Alaska that supports certification. All other conservation groups in Alaska surveyed by *Cascadia Times* oppose certification. (*Cascadia Times* does not consider the Marine Conservation Alliance, an industry front group, to be a conservation group. But, for the record, the Alliance supports certification.)

The certification gives Unilever and other seafood companies the right to place a Marine Stewardship Council sustainability logo on their products.

The MSC analysis may be skewed because it fails to account for new research showing that sea lions and the pollock fleet are both hunting for adult fish. For years, scientists thought the fishing vessels netted the big pollock, and the sea lions liked the small ones. But after two studies produced contrary results in 2004 (see Page 9 for the citations), they no longer think that's true. Scientists now know that both humans and marine mammals both prefer the bigger, adult fish.

The pollock fishery has been compared to the Klondike gold-rush, with much of the resource liquidated very rapidly. Foreign fleets fished out the Donut Hole in the center of the Bering Sea, destroying a huge pollock aggregation in the process. U.S. boats fished down the Aleutian, Bogoslov Island and Gulf of Alaska pollock stocks to low levels.

A brief history of Alaska's commercial pollock fishery:

1964: Foreign pollock fishery begins in the Bering Sea.

1972: After reaching an all time record harvest of almost 1.9 million tons, the U.S., Japan and U.S.S.R. agree to reduce the annual catch.

1976: Congress passes the Magnuson Act regulating ocean fisheries and establishing the North Pacific Council.

1980: United States vessels begin fishing for pollock in 1980; by 1987 the new U.S. fleet takes 99 percent of the entire catch in U.S. waters.

FROM MID-WATER TO THE DEEP FRY

Pollock, a fish that is usually caught in nets pulled through the middle of the water column, rather than the bottom, winds up deep fried in many packages familiar to consumers. What's interesting about these products is you have to read the fine print to learn it's pollock. A salmon product would hardly be so anonymous. An informal survey of grocery stores in Portland,



Oregon, found no pollock products in natural foods outlets but plenty of choices at larger supermarkets, not to mention beneath the Golden Arches.



ARCTIC STORM — Below, the Arctic Storm, a 340-foot floating factory trawler that catches and processes Bering Sea pollock. The vessel is a converted gasoline tanker original built in 1942. Above, a haul of pollock.

1981: 73 million pounds of fish, mostly pollock, are landed at Dutch Harbor, on the Aleutian island of Unimak.

1984: Pollock harvest in the Gulf of Alaska begins a long decline.

1985: Foreign vessels begin fishing in the international zone of the Bering Sea (commonly referred to as the "Donut Hole").

1989: 504 million pounds of fish landed at Dutch Harbor. For the first time, Dutch leads the nation, a distinction it has yet to relinquish.

1990: Steller sea lion listed as threatened, and vessels are barred from transiting within 3 nautical miles of rookeries.

1991: The controversial practice of stripping pollock roe is banned.

1992: No-trawl zones around some sea lion rookeries and haul-outs are designated.

1993: 793 million pounds landed at Dutch Harbor, more than double the second leading U.S. port, Kodiak,

Alaska. Pollock harvest in Gulf of Alaska and Donut Hole are shut down after heavy fishing decimates the stocks.

1997: NOAA Fisheries lists the western stock of Steller sea lion endangered, but no additional protective measures are implemented.

1998: Congress passes American Fisheries Act, dividing the Bering Sea pollock fishery among a number of interests.

1999: Pollock fishery in the Aleutian Islands is closed, and remains closed through 2004.

2000: The overall pollock population remains plentiful in the Bering Sea, but scientists believe local depletions may harm sea lions.

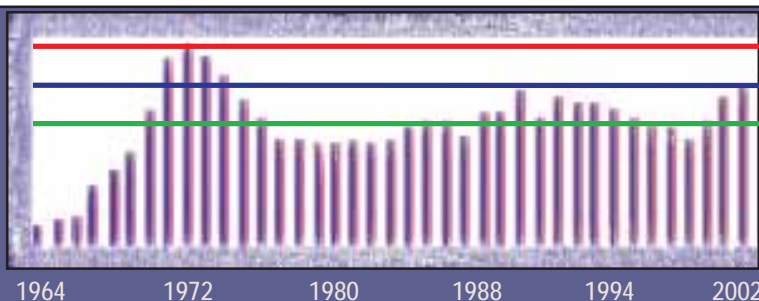
2002: Dutch Harbor, still ranked as the nation's top commercial fishing port, lands 908 million pounds. In second place is Empire, Louisiana, which lands 398 million pounds.

2003: Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens passes a rider reopening the Aleutian Island pollock fishery, in a special deal involving an Aleut Corporation entity and Ted's son Ben.

2004: North Pacific Council sets largest pollock quota in its 28-year history. The Steller sea lion population remains near its historic low level. ■

* 1972 Peak Harvest: 1,875,000 tons
 * 2003 Harvest: 1,492,000 tons
 * 1964-2003 Average: 1,125,000 tons

Pollock Harvest in the East Bering Sea 1964-2003



The annual pollock catch has held steady in the Eastern Bering Sea since the early 1980s at between 1 and 1.5 million tons