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Hot pots

Bering Sea fleet mixes it up
in long chase for crab and cod

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Alyeska Seafoods processors off-load Pacific cod from the Aleutian Mariner's hold in Unalaska, Alaska.

Double boiler

Extended crab and cod seasons keep the Bering Sea pot fleet churning

By Annie Ropeik

In the wheelhouse of the 117-foot Aleutian Mariner, skipper Gordon Kristjanson is doing some spring cleaning: washing windows, wiping down wood paneling and rearranging his navigational charts. It's early March, unseasonably warm and sunny in Unalaska, Alaska, and Kristjanson and his crew have just switched over from fishing crab to Pacific cod — six weeks later than usual.

"Crab was steady — it was steady the whole time," Kristjanson says as he watches Alyeska Seafoods processors off-load the Aleutian's first cod haul of the year. "And then we came in here, and we rigged gear and worked like maniacs and got out on the cod grounds as fast as we could. Last night



Deckhands Cole Wasson (left) and Ryan Fry rig crab pots outside the Farrar Sea in Dutch Harbor.



was the first break of any kind we've had. I mean, we had 10 hours of sleep at the docks."

Pot boats over 60 feet long, like Kristjanson's, have been out fishing almost nonstop since the Bering Sea crab seasons opened last fall. Usually, the fleet would take a break in January to snatch up

some cod before going back to opilio snow and Bairdi tanner crab through the spring. But this year has been different. Huge crab quotas and lackluster cod prices have meant most of the 40 fishing vessels in the over-60-foot pot fleet have done things backwards.

"In the last couple of years, we've seen 29 to 31 boats start off with cod right away, January 1," says federal management biologist Krista Milani,

who oversees the cod fishery in Dutch Harbor. "This year we saw 12."

The rest, she says, stayed focused on crab, either delaying cod or planning to forego it altogether — meaning a long, slow cod sea-

"It was money on the table. You just keep going until you're sick of it, or it closes, one of the two."

— James Wilson, Skipper,

FARRAR SEA



son that pushed well past its usual end date of late January, overlapping with other fisheries and throwing processing plants off their normal schedules.

Of course, it's been a nice end-of-season bonus for boats like the Aleutian Mariner: "Christmas in March," says Kristjanson. Of the seven-vessel Mariner co-op, based in Seattle, the Aleutian is the only one that finished crab in time to sneak in a few loads of cod. Their first was 280,000 pounds — worth anywhere from \$56,000 to \$84,000 at current market prices, in the 20- to 30-cent range. That high end's about the same as last year.

"I think they're jealous that we got all our crab, because they're all struggling right now," Kristjanson says of the rest of his co-op.

Though crab prices are down a bit from last year, too, state management biologist Heather Fitch says the big quotas have kept the fleet hard at work all season anyway. The total allowable catch for tanner crab is at its highest in two decades, five times more than last year. Snow crab got a 25 percent boost.

"It hasn't stopped," Fitch says. "Normally we get this nice lull from mid-November to January, where we can take a breather, catch up on paperwork. There has been no break. Not even, like, a week. It's just been solid."

Unlike crab, where quota is divided

up among the fleet, cod is still an open-access fishery — meaning boats can take as much fish as they can find until they reach the season quota. Kristjanson's crew is planning to try another trip or two to the cod grounds before the season's projected end in mid-March.

With so many fisheries going on at once right now — especially trawl cod, which started on Jan. 20 and normally barely touches pot cod — Kristjanson says it's a bit of a free-for-all out there.

"Where I was going to set the gear, I'd call it a real cod show," he says of their last trip. But he hasn't had any trouble jockeying for space with trawlers, "other than a heated discussion with a longliner," he says.

For the handful of boats that stuck to cod like normal back in January, springtime is now crab time — and time to celebrate their biggest

cod seasons ever. Atop that list is the 100-foot Farrar Sea, based in Homer, Alaska. They fished cod from midnight Jan. 1 all the way into early March.

"We're out there, and all of a sudden, it's like, 'Where is everybody?'" says skipper James Wilson. "And we kept doing trip after trip after trip, and it kept getting better and better, and next thing you know, it's like, 'Holy crap. This is adding up.' So we just kept doing it."

The Farrar Sea took more than 3 million pounds of Pacific cod over the course of its season — almost 15 percent of the overall quota, all by themselves. Warmer-than-average waters also meant those fish spawned earlier than normal, bringing in the roe that pushes up prices in the spring.

"It was money on the table. You just keep going until you're sick of it, or it closes, one of the two," Wilson says. "In this case it was the first one."

While the Aleutian Mariner was out on their very first cod trip, Wilson's

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COVER STORY

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crew was in Dutch Harbor, resetting their cod pots to catch snow crab. They tied up near the Icicle Seafoods floating processor, the Gordon Jensen, where they off-load.

"We probably actually got more [cod] because the quota lasted longer," says vessel manager Brian Finley. "It was more productive just because our guys fished a lot longer, and they were able to bring more deliveries."

Cod's been more of a headache for Icicle's offshore crab processor, the Robert M. Thorstenson or RMT, which sits in Unalaska's Wide Bay on the other side of the island. Vessel manager Keith Nelson says he's just hoping they can finish crab on their normal schedule, since trawl cod will keep them busy into April. The RMT might run into a traffic jam of its own soon — Shell Oil's Arctic drilling rigs are set to moor in Wide Bay this summer, and some are already en route to Unalaska.

"I don't want to wait for anybody, but I might have to wait for the last guys who were fishing pot cod that were directly related to us," Nelson says. "If we had crab every day, we'd be done by the end of the month. That's a lot of ifs."

For shoreside processor Alyeska Seafoods, balancing the out-of-order seasons has been a big challenge.

"It's just upside-down," says plant manager Don Goodfellow. "Everybody's just slammed right now."

Alyeska processes cod and snow crab in the same facility, and Goodfellow says they've been getting backed up with conflicts as boats — pot and trawl alike — try to bring in both species at once.

"That's our problem," says supervisor Rocky Stonecipher as he watches his 87-person processing crew turn the Aleutian Mariner's first cod delivery into mountains of filets on a Friday night. "Because cod fishing is so hot right now, it's having time to squeeze the crab in between."

In fact, they were bogged down with crab when the Aleutian Mariner called in its first delivery. Stonecipher says he gave the boat an extra day on the water — he didn't have room for them yet at the dock.

But that was no trouble for Kristjanson. There's one other thing he and other 25-year veterans say has been highly unusual about this season: sunny skies and warm temperatures in the water and air.

"I'm outside in a T-shirt yesterday. I mean, I'm fishing with the door open... and the heaters are off," Kristjanson says. "It's been a joy. It makes you wonder why everybody isn't a fisherman."

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“Because cod fishing is so hot right now, it's having time to squeeze the crab in between.”

— Ricky Stonecipher,

ALYESKA SEAFOODS

Annie Ropeik is a freelance writer based in Unalaska, Alaska.