

Winter Fisheries in Alaska

Some of the state's biggest catches are lesser known

People often think of Alaska's world-famous fishing in terms of its iconic summer salmon harvests, but Alaska's real "biggest catch" is pollock, which produces the highest volume and greatest dollar value of any single species. Nearly 40 percent is landed between late January and the end of March — about 2.9 billion pounds in 2012.

Though winter fisheries are less visible, many of Alaska's most important seafood harvests take place in the dark winter months. After pollock, the major winter harvests include other groundfish such as cod, flatfish, Atka mackerel, rockfish, and sablefish as well as king crab, snow crab, and the year-round Southeast king salmon troll.

Bigger harvests but fewer jobs

Although the harvests are larger, winter seafood harvesting and processing jobs are dwarfed by

the deluge of employment centered on the summer salmon season. (See Exhibit 1.) In 2012, total fish harvesting employment peaked in July at nearly 25,000 jobs. Average employment between October 2011 and March 2012 was just 3,300.

Seafood processing employment shows a similar but less dramatic seasonal trend. In 2012, processing employment peaked in July at 19,500 jobs, and winter employment averaged 7,500 jobs a month between October and March. (See Exhibit 3.)

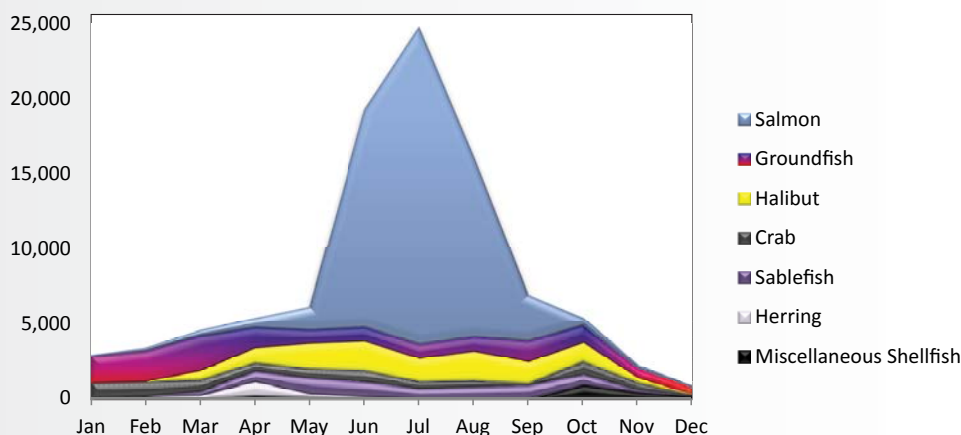
Groundfish dwarfs other species

Most winter commercial fishing takes place in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska in the crab and groundfish fisheries. Groundfish harvesting employment usually peaks in February or March, which mirrors groundfish harvest volumes. September shows another, smaller seasonal employment spike. (See Exhibit 2.)

The gear used to harvest groundfish makes the jobs less labor-intensive, so demand for fishing jobs is lower than for salmon. Large trawl vessels catch most groundfish and often process the fish on board.

Despite its lower profile, groundfish harvests dwarf other species in terms of volume. In 2012, fishermen landed 1.8 billion pounds of groundfish in between December and February, which is three times more than all the salmon caught in Alaska that year.

1 Monthly Fishing Job Distribution by Species Alaska, 2012



Sources: Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission; Alaska Department of Fish and Game; National Marine Fisheries Service; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Crab also peaks in the winter

Like groundfish, crab harvesting employment also has two distinct peaks. (See Exhibit 2.) The Bering Sea snow crab harvest begins in January and continues into the spring, and Southeast tanner and golden king crab fisheries open in February. The Bering Sea red king crab fishery starts in the late fall. Employment in the Dungeness crab harvest, mostly in Southeast, typically peaks in July but at lower levels than the winter crab fisheries.

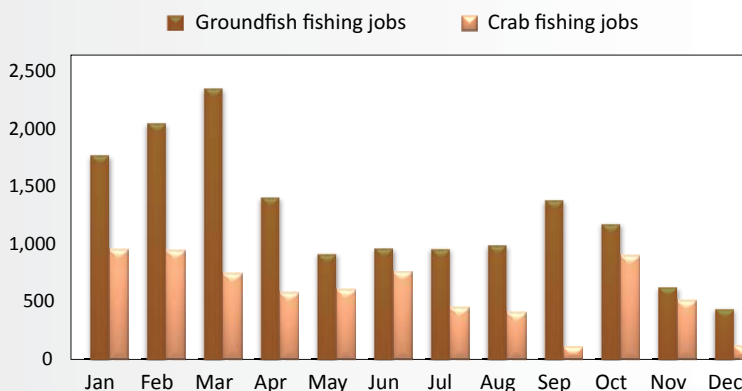
The foundation of some towns

Winter fisheries are vital to communities with year-round seafood processing, particularly in the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands. Dutch Harbor, the top fishing port in the nation by volume and second-highest for dollar value, is a major winter fishing hub.

Seafood processing employment in the Aleutians West Census Area, home to Dutch Harbor and other year-round ports, is higher in the winter than in the summer thanks to abundant crab and groundfish processing work. (See Exhibit 3.)

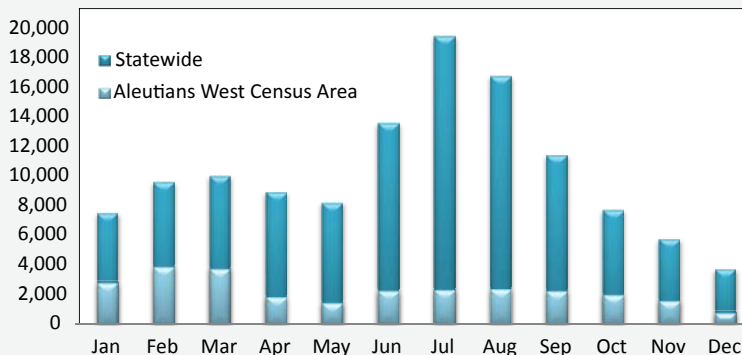
Nearly a third of all winter processing employment statewide is in Aleutians West, which combined with the Kodiak Island and Aleutians East boroughs makes up close to three-quarters of all winter seafood processing employment.

2 Groundfish and Crab Harvest Jobs Alaska, 2012



Sources: Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission; Alaska Department of Fish and Game; National Marine Fisheries Service; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

3 Seafood Processing Employment Statewide and Aleutians West, 2012



Sources: Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission; Alaska Department of Fish and Game; National Marine Fisheries Service; and Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section