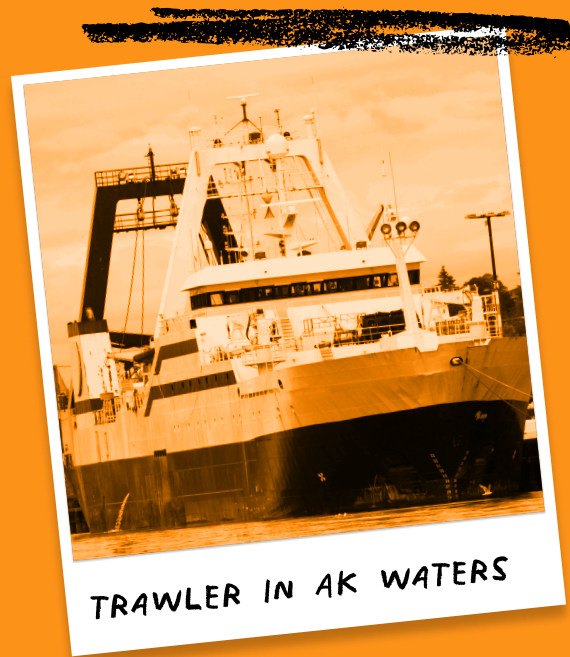




BEYOND THE TRAWL TALES

The Real Costs of
Industrial Trawling in Alaska

SEPTEMBER 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For decades, the trawl industry — or Big Trawl — invested heavily in shaping public perceptions of the Alaska pollock fishery. Through advertising, lobbying, sustainability certifications, and coordinated messaging, the industry has promoted a series of claims portraying industrial trawling as environmentally responsible, economically indispensable, and essential to local and global seafood production.

These messages have become so pervasive that they are often repeated as fact. But the reality is more complex.

Behind the industry's messaging lies an ecosystem under extraordinary strain. Warming oceans, marine heatwaves, and shifting food webs are placing increasing pressure on Alaska's marine ecosystems, while industrial trawling adds additional stress through bycatch, habitat disturbance, and removal of marine life.

This report examines five of the industry's most common claims and compares them with recent scientific research, federal fisheries data, and publicly available economic information. Together, these findings reveal a consistent pattern: industry messaging emphasizes the benefits of a highly consolidated pollock fleet dominated by out-of-state corporate interests, while minimizing the broader ecological, economic, and cultural impacts experienced by Alaska communities.

These narratives matter because they shape policy decisions, public understanding, and the future of Alaska's marine resources.

TRAWL TALE

TRUTH

1

The Bering Sea is thriving.

The Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska are experiencing significant ecological change. Industrial trawling adds pressure through bycatch, habitat disturbance, and removal of important species.

2

Bycatch is minimal and has limited impact.

Percentage-based measures obscure significant impacts. In a fishery harvesting billions of pounds, even a small bycatch rate can result in millions of fish and other marine animals killed or discarded.

3	Big Trawl broadly benefits Alaska's economy.	Trawl's economic benefits are concentrated among a relatively small number of companies primarily based in Washington state. With ownership being out of state, the profits and labor are also out of state.
4	"Midwater" trawl gear has little or no impact on the seafloor.	"Midwater" or pelagic trawl gear has a misleading name, as it does contact the seafloor and interact with sensitive habitats, particularly where fishing effort is repeated over time.
5	Trawling occurs only in limited areas.	False regulatory distinctions between gear types allow industrial trawling in areas intended to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems.

And the costs are real.

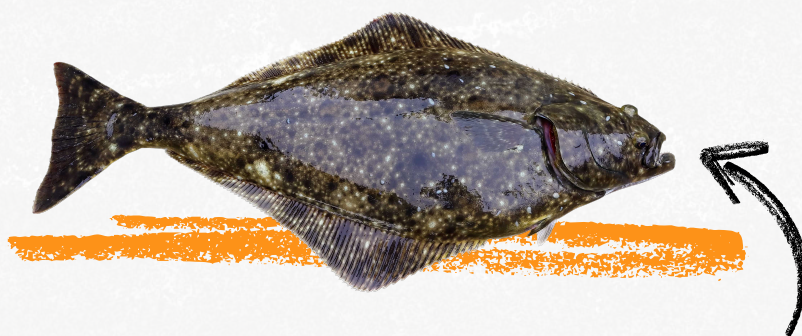
Commercial fishermen, charter operators, sport fishermen, and subsistence users face shrinking opportunities as bycatch removes salmon and other fish before they can reach rivers or directed fisheries. Salmon and halibut continue to be discarded as bycatch, crab stocks have collapsed, and vulnerable seafloor habitats remain exposed through regulatory loopholes that allow so-called "midwater" trawlers to operate in areas closed to bottom trawling, even if they're scraping the bottom.

Reducing avoidable mortality, habitat disturbance, and ecosystem disruption is one of the few immediate actions available to improve the resilience of the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska.

The purpose of this report is simple: to separate industry messaging from scientific evidence. Policymakers, consumers, and the public deserve a complete and honest accounting of industrial trawling's impacts — not just the carefully curated story the industry tells.

Alaskans' resources require transparent information, accountable management, and the willingness to challenge myths — or Trawl Tales — that no longer withstand scrutiny.

PACIFIC HALIBUT HIPPOGLOSSUS STENOLEPIS



57.5 million lbs wasted as trawl bycatch since 2017

"THE BERING SEA IS THRIVING."

TRAWL TALE

The Bering Sea is a thriving ecosystem that is adaptable and capable of recovery.

TRUTH

The ocean's once-abundant waters are deteriorating rapidly, while intensive trawling further accelerates the decline.

The Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska are experiencing profound ecological disruption. Trawling only compounds their problems.

For decades, industrial trawling has profoundly altered Alaskan waters. Heavy gear repeatedly drags across the seafloor, damaging essential habitat while catching vast quantities of unintended species. Fish, crab, and even marine mammals like whales and seals can be caught and discarded, while the removal of key species reverberates throughout the interconnected marine food web.¹ In ecosystems already undergoing significant change, the scale and intensity of trawling add another powerful human pressure: altering habitats, shifting species interactions, and changing how these waters function.

Unlike other sources of pressure, trawling impacts can be reduced through improved management.

CASE STUDY

Salmon are a warning sign. They connect ocean and freshwater ecosystems, carry marine nutrients into rivers, support commercial and subsistence fisheries, and are deeply woven into the cultural and economic life of Western Alaska. Yet salmon populations are struggling on multiple fronts. Along the Kuskokwim and Yukon rivers, Chinook or King, chum, and coho or silver salmon have experienced significant declines as they confront a combination of warming waters, reduced forage, competition, and fishing-related mortality. Bycatch is the one cause of mortality we can immediately address.

"DECLINING BY MORE
THAN 60 - 80% SINCE
THE LATE 1990S."

King salmon abundance has fallen sharply, with spawner abundance in the Yukon and Kuskokwim regions declining by more than 60 - 80% since the late 1990s. The salmon that are returning are also changing. King body size has declined over the past three decades, while the age structure of returning fish has shifted substantially toward younger, smaller fish. Smaller body size and younger age at return can reduce reproductive potential, leaving already stressed populations more susceptible to mortality.

TRAWL TALE NO.1 CONTD.

The warning extends to the next generation. The juvenile King index in the northern Bering Sea reached an all-time low in 2024, signaling the potential for continued depressed returns, particularly to the Yukon River, in the years ahead.

The management implication is clear: When salmon populations are already depleted and communities are facing harvest restrictions, Alaska cannot afford to treat avoidable marine mortality as inconsequential. Reducing trawl-related mortality is one of the few immediate pressures managers can directly control.

Alaska cannot reverse warming oceans or rebuild depleted salmon stocks overnight. But it can choose whether industrial fishing continues to add pressure to an ecosystem already under strain.

KING (CHINOOK) SALMON *ONCORHYNCHUS TSHAWYTSCHA*



Trawl is to blame for 84.7% of all bycatch since 2017

"BYCATCH IS MINIMAL AND HAS LITTLE IMPACT."

TRAWL TALE

Pollock trawlers have exceptionally low bycatch rates, making the fishery one of the most efficient and responsible in the world.

TRUTH

A small percentage can still mean millions of fish and other marine life. The problem with judging bycatch only as a percentage is simple: The denominator is enormous.

Pollock may be the target, but it is far from the only thing caught — and killed — by Big Trawl in their industrial trawl fisheries. Because the volume of pollock harvested is measured in the billions of pounds, even a fraction of one percent can translate into tens of millions of pounds of salmon, halibut, whales, and other marine life removed from the ecosystem and lost as waste. These are fish caught and killed before they can lay eggs, producing the next generation of salmon.

And those animals are not interchangeable. They include salmon returning to Western Alaska rivers, halibut supporting directed fisheries, and crab from populations that have experienced extraordinary declines.

The biological importance of bycatch depends on far more than its percentage of total catch. It depends on:

- how many animals are killed;
- which species are involved;
- whether those populations are already declining;
- whether the animals are reproductively important;
- what role they play in the food web; and
- what other fisheries and communities depend on them.

By those measures, the impact of trawl bycatch cannot be dismissed as insignificant. In fact, taken together, these impacts reveal a scale of waste and destruction that is difficult to dismiss as an incidental cost of fishing.

TRAWL TALE NO.2 CONTD.

CASE STUDY

The industry often emphasizes bycatch as a percentage of its enormous target catch. But percentages can obscure the real-world consequences.

Between 2017 - 2024, trawl killed 422 total marine mammal deaths. Between 2017 - 2025, trawl fisheries have wasted and discarded more than 3 million salmon, 9.26 million crabs, and at least 57.5 million pounds of halibut as bycatch.

When a fishery removes billions of pounds of fish, even a fraction of one percent can mean millions of animals killed. Those animals may already be struggling, support other fisheries, or play essential roles in Alaska's marine ecosystems.

"KILLED AND DISCARDED MORE THAN 3 MILLION SALMON, 9.26 MILLION CRABS, AND AT LEAST 57.5 MILLION POUNDS OF HALIBUT AS BYCATCH."

Salmon illustrate the stakes. **Since 2017, trawl fisheries have accounted for 99.9% of documented salmon bycatch, wasting more than 3 million salmon — more than 2,000 times the amount attributed to non-trawl gear.²** The pollock fishery alone accounts for approximately 2.88 million salmon, or 95.2% of documented salmon bycatch during that period, including approximately 84.7% of King and 96.7% of non-King salmon caught as bycatch. For Western Alaska communities facing severe salmon declines and harvest restrictions, these are not inconsequential losses. Salmon connect ocean and freshwater ecosystems, transport marine nutrients into rivers, sustain commercial and subsistence fisheries, and remain central to Indigenous cultures and traditions. When salmon populations are already under pressure from warming waters, changing forage, competition, and other factors, additional mortality in industrial trawl nets becomes increasingly consequential.

Halibut tells a similar story. Fish killed in trawl nets are removed before they can contribute to spawning populations or reach fishermen targeting halibut. Since 2017, trawl gear has accounted for approximately 62% of documented halibut bycatch and more than 88% of halibut mortality across fisheries in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. Non-midwater, or pelagic, trawl gear alone accounts for approximately 21,944 metric tons of halibut mortality. Halibut bycatch reached approximately 9.9 million pounds in 2019 and remained above 4.6 million pounds in 2025. NOAA data indicate that approximately 60% of halibut caught in non-pelagic trawl gear die. For halibut fishermen, that mortality represents fish removed from the population before they can contribute to the fishery.

TRAWL TALE NO.2 CONTD.

Crab shows perhaps most clearly why bycatch cannot be dismissed by pointing to a percentage. Between 2017 and 2026, trawl vessels caught and discarded an estimated 9.26 million crabs as bycatch, representing approximately 76.6% of documented crab bycatch across gear types. In 2025 alone, trawl gear caught more than 345,000 crabs, including more than 220,000 Tanner crab, approximately 104,000 snow crab, and nearly 18,000 red king crab.³ These removals occurred against the backdrop of extraordinary declines in Bering Sea crab populations. The snow crab population fell by approximately 90%, contributing to the closure of the snow crab fishery in 2022.

Taken together, salmon, halibut, and crab tell the same story: Bycatch is not adequately measured by percentage alone. When Alaska's marine ecosystems and fisheries are already under stress, millions of additional animals removed as bycatch cannot simply be written off as incidental.

The question is whether Alaska should continue accepting avoidable mortality that undermines other fisheries, ecosystems, and communities.



"BIG TRAWL BROADLY BENEFITS ALASKA'S ECONOMY."

TRAWL TALE

Pollock is an economic cornerstone for Alaska, supporting jobs, communities, family businesses, and prosperity across the state.

TRUTH

The pollock industry is highly consolidated and vertically integrated, with major companies headquartered outside Alaska, particularly in Washington state. Only approximately **25% of industrial trawl vessels operating in Alaska are Alaska-owned**. According to industry economic reporting, **approximately \$450 million in labor income associated with the Alaska pollock sector flows to Washington state, compared with approximately \$336 million to Alaska.**⁴

The industry directly employs approximately 8,277 workers across the United States, but in Alaska, pollock accounts for less than 1% of direct statewide employment.⁵

Even the industry's employment claims require closer examination. Seafood processing is often included in the economic case for pollock, yet Alaska's seafood-processing workforce is overwhelmingly nonresident. More than 80% of seafood-processing workers statewide are nonresidents, with some seafood-processing regions reporting nonresident rates as high as 98%.⁶ Jobs may be physically located in Alaska, but that does not mean the wages, profits, or long-term economic benefits remain in Alaska or accrue primarily to Alaska residents. Without a state income tax, Alaskans benefit very little from out-of-state workers coming in, working and living on a boat, then leaving with their earnings.

Economic impact also cannot be measured simply by counting the dollars generated by industrial trawling. It requires asking who owns the vessels, who receives the profits, where wages and income flow, and what economic opportunities are displaced when industrial fishing affects other fisheries.

"\$450 MILLION
IN LABOR INCOME
ASSOCIATED WITH
THE ALASKA POLLOCK
SECTOR FLOWS TO
WASHINGTON STATE,
COMPARED WITH
APPROXIMATELY
\$336 MILLION
TO ALASKA."

TRAWL TALE NO.3 CONTD.

CASE STUDY

A salmon fisherman does not receive compensation when salmon are intercepted as trawl bycatch. A halibut fisherman does not recover the value of fish killed before they reach a directed fishery. A crabber does not recover lost income when crab populations decline or habitat is disturbed. And when a fishery closes, the communities that depend on it do not automatically share in the economic gains generated by the industrial fishery that remains open.

That is the part of the economic story that industry messaging often leaves out.

Pollock can generate substantial economic activity without distributing that value broadly across Alaska. When ownership, profits, and labor income are concentrated outside the state while the ecological and economic costs are borne by Alaska fishermen and communities, calling the fishery an economic benefit to Alaska tells only part of the story.

Alaska should not measure the success of industrial trawling by what it generates alone, but also what other fisheries and communities lose.



**ONLY 25% OF INDUSTRIAL
TRAWL VESSELS OPERATING
IN ALASKA ARE ALASKA-OWNED.**

"'MIDWATER' TRAWL GEAR HAS LITTLE OR NO IMPACT ON THE SEAFLOOR."

TRAWL TALE

Pollock is harvested in midwater, keeping trawl gear above the seafloor and minimizing habitat impacts.

TRUTH

The seafloor does not care what the net is called. "Midwater" describes how the gear is intended to fish. It does not guarantee that the gear never reaches the bottom.

"Midwater" or pelagic trawl gear can and does contact the seafloor, with the frequency varying by vessel, season, location, and fishing conditions. Estimates indicate that midwater trawl gear can contact the bottom during nearly half the time during fishing operations

That matters because the seafloor is a living habitat. Corals, sponges, anemones, bryozoans, ascidians, amphipods, and other organisms create physical structure and ecological functions that support fish, crab, and other marine life. Some of these organisms grow extremely slowly. A trawl can destroy in moments what took decades to develop.

"TRAWLERS IN THE ALEUTIAN ISLANDS REMOVED NEARLY 2.2 MILLION KGS OF CORAL AND SPONGE, WITH BOTTOM TRAWLING ACCOUNTING FOR NEARLY 90% OF THAT LOSS."

Across Alaska, trawling has removed habitat-forming organisms that provide shelter, feeding grounds, and structure for other species. From 1990 to 2002, trawlers in the Aleutian Islands removed more than 4.4 million pounds of corals and sponges, with bottom trawling accounting for nearly 90% of that loss. The effects can persist long after vessels leave. More than a decade after trawling ceased, central Gulf of Alaska sponge beds remained approximately one-third less dense and showed 58% more damage than adjacent untrawled habitat.⁷

The damage extends beyond corals and sponges. Tube-building amphipods are an important component of the northern Bering Sea food web. They take two to four years to mature and construct persistent tube structures in the sediment. Trawl gear can destroy these structures almost instantly, while recovery can take far longer.⁸

A global analysis of 122 studies found that one trawl pass reduced the abundance of seafloor animals by an average of 26% and reduced the number of species by 19%. When fishing repeatedly disturbs the same grounds, the problem is no longer a single interaction — it becomes chronic habitat pressure.⁹

TRAWL TALE NO.4 CONTD.

CASE STUDY

The distinction between “midwater” and “bottom” trawling should be based on where the gear fishes and what happens when the gear reaches the seafloor. It turns out there is not much of a difference.

A gear designation should not become a shield against accountability. If industrial trawling can damage vulnerable seafloor habitat, Alaska’s management system should address that activity according to its real-world impact.

CHUM SALMON ONCORHYNCHUS KETA



Trawl has wasted over 81,602 chum salmon this year alone

"TRAWLING OCCURS ONLY IN LIMITED AREAS."

TRAWL TALE

Trawling only occurs in a small area and avoids sensitive, protected waters.

TRUTH

Alaska has established habitat conservation areas because some marine ecosystems are too vulnerable to withstand repeated fishing disturbance. These protections recognize the importance of corals, sponges, crab habitat, and other seafloor communities that provide structure and shelter for marine life and may take decades or even centuries to recover from damage.

But those protections often hinge on how fishing gear is classified.

MORE THAN 348
MILLION ACRES
OF WATERS
CHARACTERIZED
AS PROTECTED FROM
BOTTOM TRAWLING
REMAIN ACCESSIBLE TO
MIDWATER TRAWL
GEAR.

Areas closed to bottom trawling can remain open to midwater trawling — even when midwater gear contacts the seafloor. The result is a regulatory loophole that allows industrial fishing to continue in waters designated for habitat conservation.

More than 348 million acres of waters characterized as protected from bottom trawling remain accessible to midwater trawl gear.¹⁰

CASE STUDY

The Aleutian Islands Habitat Conservation Area illustrates the problem. The Aleutians contain some of Alaska's most important deep-sea coral and sponge habitats. These communities create three-dimensional structures used by rockfish, crab, and numerous other species. Some grow so slowly that damage can persist for decades or centuries. Yet midwater trawling remains permitted throughout the conservation area, including designated coral garden sites containing some of the densest coral and sponge communities documented in the region.¹¹

The Red King Crab Savings Area presents another example. The area provides important habitat for Bristol Bay red king crab, including during molting and mating, when crab are particularly vulnerable to fishing gear. The red king crab stock has experienced severe declines, and the directed fishery was closed from 2021 through 2023, resulting in an estimated \$287 million in direct harvest losses in a single year.¹²

Yet midwater trawlers continue to operate throughout the savings area.

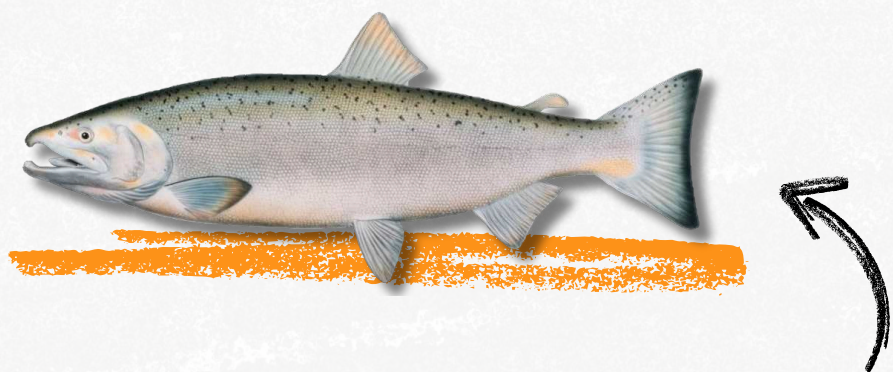
TRAWL TALE NO.5 CONTD.

These examples expose a broader flaw in the way Alaska's habitat protections are structured: An area can be designated for conservation while remaining open to fishing gear that can legally damage the very habitat the designation is intended to protect.

A protected area that remains open to damaging gear is not fully protected. Conservation should mean protection from the activities that threaten the habitat, not protection only from one technical category of gear.

If Alaska has determined that habitat is worth protecting, the rules should protect it from the impact, not merely from the name of the gear that causes it.

COHO SALMON ONCORHYNCHUS KISUTCH



Trawl is to blame for 96.7% of all non-Chinook bycatch since 2017

CONCLUSION

Industrial trawling is one component of a complex and rapidly changing Alaska marine ecosystem. But as this report has shown, the story told about trawling often leaves out important parts of this ecosystem and important parts of the cost in favor of industry talking points.

The Trawl Tales examined in this report share a common thread.

“The Bering Sea is thriving.” **IT’S NOT!**
“Bycatch is minimal.” **MISLEADING.**
“Big Trawl broadly benefits Alaska.” **FALSE.**
“Midwater trawls have little or no impact on the seafloor.”
“Trawling occurs only in limited areas.”

Each of these claims are contorted by industry public relations staff to sell Alaskans on their highly profitable business.

The fuller picture is harder to dismiss. Bycatch removes millions of fish and other marine animals — species iconic to Alaska — from an ecosystem already under stress. Trawl gear disturbs seafloor habitat, including areas that may take decades or longer to recover. Regulatory distinctions can allow industrial fishing to continue in places many Alaskans believe should receive greater protection. And the few benefits of trawl are concentrated among a relatively small number of companies and owners, while other fisheries and Alaska communities can bear significant ecological and economic costs.

These impacts compound one another.

That is why the question facing Alaska is not simply how much fish industrial trawlers can harvest, or whether the industry can tell a compelling story about the benefits it provides. The question is whether Alaska’s fisheries management will continue accepting these impacts as the cost of doing business, or whether it will account for the full consequences of industrial trawling and take meaningful steps to reduce avoidable harm.

Trawl Tales are powerful because they simplify a complicated story. Alaska’s marine ecosystems are too valuable, and the stakes are too high, to manage them according to a story that leaves out the costs.

A stronger future for Alaska fisheries requires looking beyond the volume of fish harvested and asking what else is taken, what is disturbed, who benefits, and who pays the price.

Alaska deserves more than a Trawl Tale. It deserves the full story and a future where its fisheries, communities, and marine ecosystems can thrive.

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