

Alaska Abalone Recovery Working Group

Alaska's pinto abalone stocks have been devastated by overfishing, predation by a rapidly expanding sea otter population and other unknown factors, causing them to be listed as a "species of concern" under the Endangered Species Act. In fact, pinto abalone stocks from Sitka Sound to the southern tip of California are experiencing similar problems.

In response to growing concern about the status of pinto abalone, a broad-based coalition has been formed to develop a recovery of Alaska's only abalone species. The Alaska Abalone Recovery Working Group (AARWG) is in the initial stages of developing a Pinto Abalone Recovery Plan aimed at helping reverse continued declines in abalone stocks.

AARWG is comprised of representatives of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, NOAA, Sitka Sound Science Center, Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation, Southeast Region Dive Fisheries Association, Alutiiq Pride Shellfish Hatchery, Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, and OceansAlaska.

Pinto abalone recovery plans have been written for Washington, California and British Columbia and work has been initiated in all three areas. (Oregon's coastline lacks good abalone habitat.) Alaska currently is the only jurisdiction that has allowed continued abalone harvest since the 1990s when all other fisheries were closed.

Since the state has no idea what is the current status of the once plentiful abalone stocks in Southeast Alaska, a pilot project has been initiated in Sitka Sound involving the Sitka Sound Science Center, UA-Southeast and ADFG. Survey protocols for abalone stock abundance and habitat surveys currently are being developed by ADFG and will be tested in 2015 in Sitka Sound. The project also involves establishment of sites where abalone abundance and recruitment will be monitored over a two-year period.

AARWG has adopted the following goals:

- Develop an Alaska Pinto Abalone Recovery Plan that lays out long-term strategies for helping the troubled stocks reach a sustainable level.
- Work closely with state, federal, tribal, community and non-profit entities to secure funding for abalone population and habitat surveys throughout the range of the species in Southeast.
- Fine-tune survey techniques and develop tools such as “knowledge mapping” and a habitat suitability model to help define survey areas. Conduct the surveys and analyze data collected to estimate current biomass, recruitment and effects of sea otter predation.
- Establish test sites for monitoring changes in pinto abalone recruitment, local biomass and effects of otter predation.
- Conduct public workshops in key Southeast communities to discuss recovery strategies and early survey results.
- Continue hatchery and nursery work with pinto abalone and determine role of aquaculture in recovery efforts.
- Collect genetic samples for analysis by ADFG lab.
- Attempt to survey S.E. residents to determine current levels of abalone harvests and identify active user groups.
- Help organize a major symposium on abalone recovery programs to gather current information of projects throughout the world.
- Analyze current management of pinto abalone stocks and make recommendations, if appropriate, to the Alaska Board of Fisheries.