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NEW STUDY SHOWS FISHERMEN HOW TO BOOST COD CATCH,
CUT HALIBUT BYCATCH IN DEVELOPING POT FISHERY

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA -- Pot fishermen fishing for cod could increase their catch and decrease halibut bycatch with a few simple pot modifications, according to a research project just completed.

Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation (AFDF) has released a new study that shows pot fishermen can increase their cod harvests up to 600% and reduce halibut bycatch to as low as 2% of the overall catch. All that's needed, the study says, is a commercial fish retention device and a couple of dividers in the pot's tunnel opening.

The study was conducted by a research team at the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADFG) as part of an AFDF project to investigate gear modifications that would help reduce halibut bycatch in Alaska's fisheries. It was funded by the Alaska Science & Technology Foundation.

Pot fishing for cod is a relatively new fishery in the waters off Alaska, and is considered one of the "cleanest" fisheries, because halibut that is incidentally caught can be returned to the sea in good shape. The average unmodified pot in this study harvested about 49 lbs. of cod and 68 lbs. of halibut. With gear modifications, cod harvests increased to 328 lbs. and halibut bycatch decreased to 4 lbs. - 18 lbs. per pot.

Cod fishermen first tried pots in 1985, and in 1988 pot fishermen caught more than 3 million lbs. of cod in the Gulf of Alaska. Harvests dropped to 1 million lbs. in 1989, but shot up last year to 13 million lbs., nearly 5% of the total 1990 cod harvest.

The ADFG research team tested crab pots with eight different variations using different sized tunnel openings and three different commercial fish retention devices -- the Gotya, the Neptune cod trigger, and the Norsol cod sock. They discovered that reorienting the tunnel eye to a vertical angle from the pot encouraged cod to enter the pot. In addition, the fish retention devices helped keep cod in the pots once they were caught.

The research team also discovered that dividing the tunnels into two or three openings helped increase cod catches and discourage halibut from entering the pot.

"Pot fishing for cod already is an up-and-coming alternative for many groundfish fishermen," said Mel Monsen, executive director of AFDF. "With this project, we wanted to document the effects of gear modifications, so fishermen have some useful information to work with if they decide to enter the pot cod fishery."

State and federal fishery managers will also use the information to help manage the expanding pot cod fishery, Monsen said.

Halibut bycatch -- the incidental harvest of halibut while targeting on another species -- is one of the North Pacific seafood industry's biggest problems. High bycatch rates among the groundfish trawl and longline fleets have prompted fishery closures in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea in recent seasons.

"AFDF has been asked by the industry to help develop gear modifications or new fishing methods to decrease bycatch," Monsen said. "The problem of incidental catch of high-value species is one of the most complex and pressing issues they face right now."

Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation is a non-profit company formed by Alaskan fishermen and processors to help develop new technology, products, markets and ideas for the North Pacific seafood industry.