

Representative Mary Peltola **Bottom Trawl Clarity Act**

Fishing is critical to Alaska’s economy. In 2022, the Alaska seafood industry harvested 4.8 billion pounds of seafood, more than 60% of the total US harvest and 1.3% of the global seafood harvest, including wild-caught and aquaculture. The fishing and seafood industry employs more than 17,000 Alaskans and is often the largest employer in coastal Alaska communities.¹ Depending on the target species, many different gear types are used: hook-and-line, pots, gillnets, and trawling are all used in Alaskan fisheries.

Trawling is an industrial fishing method that uses nets towed behind boats to catch fish that live on or near the seafloor. Trawl vessels, or trawlers, can vary from small boats operated by independent fishermen to large factory trawlers with processing facilities on board. Trawl fishing can be divided into two categories based on where the net falls in the water column: midwater or bottom.

Bottom trawling is an efficient way to catch large numbers of fish and shellfish, responsible for 26% of the global marine catch². It is also the cause of one of the most widespread human impacts on the seabed and is relevant globally. The net rolls over the ocean floor as it is pulled, destroying complex habitats, kicking up sediment, and wounding or killing any other animals in the way.

Midwater—or pelagic—trawl is designed for fishing in the middle of the water column with minimal or no interaction with the seafloor habitat. However, when considering the seafloor impacts of pelagic trawl, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council assumed bottom contact of up to 60% seafloor contact for small pelagic trawl vessels and up to 100% for factory catcher/processors³.

The consequences of intensive bottom trawling are severe, leading to the harm and death of non-target species. The Red King Crab Savings Area, established in 1996 to protect the Red King Crab seafloor habitat, is permanently closed to bottom trawling but remains open to midwater. However, if midwater nets are assumed to make bottom contact up to 100% of the time, it begs the question: what truly distinguishes midwater from bottom trawling?

Representative Mary Sattler Peltola’s (AK-AL) Bottom Trawl Clarity Act would mandate each Fisheries Management Council that permits the use of any bottom trawl gear to define the terms “substantial” versus “limited” bottom contact. It would also require the designation of Bottom Trawl Zones, limiting the areas where gear that scrapes the seafloor is allowed. Once these zones are established, bottom trawling will only be permitted within them, potentially mitigating the environmental impact of this fishing method.

Limiting the areas where bottom trawling is allowed will help enhance marine health, diversity, and resilience, strengthening the ocean ecosystem that Alaska fishermen depend on.

¹ https://www.alaskaseafood.org/wp-content/uploads/MRG_ASMI-Economic-Impacts-WEB-PAGES.pdf

² <https://blueventures.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/HI-RES-REPORT-New-perspectives-on-an-old-fishing-practice.pdf>

³ <https://meetings.npfmc.org/CommentReview/DownloadFile?p=0cb90fa5-5e0e-40fc-9af1-00cf97ce18b6.pdf&fileName=C2%20BBRKC%20Analysis.pdf>