

# Alaska: Where Conservation Plays A Key Role In One Of The World's Biggest Fisheries

Alaskans have learned the hard way how to keep fish stocks healthy in a state where fishermen and environmentalists work together to protect the resource.

BY [NATHAN EAGLE](#) / NOVEMBER 9, 2021

DUTCH HARBOR, Alaska — Bald eagles circle overhead on a Saturday morning in July as Dustan Dickerson directs his crew from the dock at Westward Seafoods, one of several major seafood processing plants on the remote Aleutian island. They're delivering several tons of halibut and blackcod out of his 56-foot longline boat, the F/V Raven Bay.

He's one of the small guys in Dutch Harbor, the nation's top commercial fishing port by volume and his home for the past 30-plus years since moving from Oregon. But he's earned enough from fishing to put two kids through college and live a comfortable life with his wife Evie, an Alaska Native who helps run [their business](#).



## ***A Civil Beat Investigation***

This Civil Beat special report documents the political activism of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, a federal panel that sets fisheries policies that govern 1.5 million square miles of the Western Pacific Ocean. Federal law generally prohibits using taxpayer dollars to lobby on state and federal issues but Wespac has for decades pushed those rules to the limit, angering environmentalists and Native Hawaiians. Now, with climate change creating a new urgency, Congress may be about to crack down on Wespac.

**Part 1:** [Records show how Wespac has used its political power to influence state and federal policy for the benefit of the fishing industry.](#)

---

**Part 2:** [Council leaders spent heavily to set up a traditional Hawaiian system of resource management even though it infringed on state jurisdiction.](#)

---

**Part 3:** [Fighting for the interests of the commercial tuna fleet, Wespac has pressured presidents and orchestrated public opposition to marine monuments.](#)

---

**Part 4:** [Who is Kitty Simonds? A profile of the council's longtime executive director.](#)

---

**Part 5:** [Wespac has long been controlled by fishing interests but this year was forced to accept a conservation-minded member.](#)

---

**Part 6:** A reporting trip to Alaska reveals major differences between Wespac and other regional councils.

---

**Part 7:** [A major update of the Magnuson-Stevens Act under consideration by Congress would prohibit lobbying by Wespac.](#)

Some 763 million pounds of fish, mostly pollock, were landed last year in Dutch, as the locals call it. Huge factory trawlers — some five times longer than Dickerson's — catch the bulk. Seattle-based Trident Seafoods, which processes some of its catch in a permanently docked vessel five miles up the road, has a [312-foot boat in its fleet](#). The whitefish is one of the world's most

commonly consumed fish. Think McDonald's Filet-O-Fish, which uses Alaska pollock in all of its U.S. stores.

Dickerson, vice president of the Unalaska Native Fishermen's Association, has had his issues with the industrial fleets that share the bountiful Bering Sea. But he's found support in dealing with certain problems from the [North Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council](#), considered a standout among the eight regional councils.



Halibut and blackcod are offloaded from a longline boat in Dutch Harbor.

Critics of the [Western Pacific Regional Management Fishery Council](#) have held up the North Pacific Council's leadership, transparency and oversight of the industry as an example to follow.

"This is a council that works," Dickerson says as a crane pulls another transport basket full of fish out of his red-and-white boat and transfers it to a container for a summer hire from New Orleans to unload.

Dickerson says the North Pacific Council is a success because its leaders listen to the interests of coastal fishing towns and small-boat owners, not just the big commercial players who maintain a sizable influence in Alaska's multibillion-dollar fishing industry.

"Even with everything that they've got on their plate right now dealing with trawl rationalization and with abundance-based management — you know, other things that affect far more people and there's far more money at stake — they're still willing to take the time and address the needs of the communities," Dickerson said.

The UNFA was successful in getting the council's support for state regulators to ban the pollock trawlers from Unalaska Bay, he said, which gave smaller vessels like his some breathing room.

Nicholai Tutiakoff, an Alaska Native and longtime charter boat captain in Dutch Harbor, said the trawler issue in the bay spurred some of his earliest interactions with the North Pacific Council.

"They'd come in there and grab a lot of pollock," he said of the trawlers, but they would also catch king salmon and young halibut as bycatch which were important to the subsistence fishermen who live in the remote town of 4,800 people.



A Seattle-based factory trawler was docked in Dutch Harbor.

That's not necessarily how Wespac would have handled things. The Hawaii-based council has taken action in the past to, for instance, [prohibit drift gillnet fishing](#) or ban longline fishing in certain areas around the Hawaiian archipelago, among other measures that resolved heated and at times violent disputes in nearshore waters between the larger commercial fleet and smaller recreational boats.

But its general [focus since at least the 1990s](#) has been Hawaii's longline fleet, composed of roughly 140 vessels that average about 70 feet in length. It's the only significant commercial game in town, and the council caters to it, frustrating many smaller boat fishermen in the region.

The fleet's fresh bigeye tuna and swordfish, with a dockside value of \$110 million in 2019, have made Honolulu one of the top 10 ports by value but nothing compared to the \$1.8 billion of seafood — pollock, cod, halibut, salmon and crab among others — caught off Alaska, according to the most recent [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data](#).

Alaska has in many ways put more emphasis on ensuring that its fish stocks remain healthy. In a paper comparing the regional councils, Ohio State

University historian Mansel Blackford observed that in Alaska, “the need for stability and permanence trumped earlier desires for quick gains and big bucks, making most of the state’s fisheries sustainable.”

While crabs are again struggling in some places in the North Pacific, there were no species in the region experiencing overfishing as of Sept. 30, according to the most recent report by NOAA Fisheries.

Wespac, meanwhile, is currently developing policies to deal with the overfishing of oceanic whitetip sharks, silky sharks, bottomfish in American Samoa and striped marlin. Council members often say the real problem is the larger foreign fleets that fish in the region under far less oversight.

### ‘Setting The Conservation Ethic In Motion’

[Halibut Cove](#), a community of about 100 people on Kachemak Bay about 120 miles from Anchorage, is only accessible by boat or plane. A half-hour ferry ride from the Homer Spit takes you to the quaint village, which last summer only allowed visitors who were fully vaccinated against Covid-19. There’s no vehicular traffic, but a boardwalk rings the shore and a network of trails provides access to vacation rentals and a smattering of idyllic residences.

The late Clem Tillion, an icon in Alaska fisheries management who died Oct. 16 at age 96, bought his homestead there in 1948, met his wife a few years later and raised a growing family that still calls Halibut Cove home. Thousands of people used to live in Halibut Cove in the early 1900s but most left when the herring stocks collapsed.

In an interview in July at his home overlooking the bay, Tillion talked about the tough restrictions on fishing that have been necessary over the past half century to ensure future generations can also prosper and enjoy the resource.



The late Clem Tillion, seen here in July at his home in Halibut Cove, was an icon in fisheries management.

The former state lawmaker and chair of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council described a philosophical difference between the regional councils that has let fishermen from Alaska and the Pacific Northwest catch enough fish to earn a decent living without destroying the stocks.

“What I couldn’t understand with my fellow conservatives — and I’m a Republican — is how they could look at a fish or a tree different than a dollar,” he said, sitting in his leather recliner as one of his daughters came upstairs to check in. “It’s your resources, and you just don’t spend your principal.”

Hawaii had no major commercial fisheries when Wespac entered the scene after the Magnuson-Stevens Act created the regional councils in 1976, whereas fishing was already a major industry in Alaska.

Tillion suggested Alaska’s salmon roots may be one reason the region stands apart from the Western Pacific.

Alaska’s prized salmon, which played an even larger role before oil became the top economic driver, was in serious trouble in the 1950s. Out-of-state corporations were rapidly depleting the stocks by using fish traps to supply the canned salmon industry — and the federal government wasn’t doing much about it.

This became a driving force in Alaska becoming a state, Tillion said. After statehood in 1959, Alaska took over the management of salmon and adopted

strict conservation measures to save the stocks — a painful period but a critical lesson that is heeded to this day, he said.

## **Commercial Fishing Efforts in Hawaii and Alaska**

In 1959, fishermen landed about 25 million salmon. By 2011, Alaska's 10-year average landings amounted to nearly 171 million fish per year, with about half from the wild and the other half from hatcheries, according to a Pew Charitable Trusts study.

The North Pacific Council has continued to leave the management of salmon mostly to the state Department of Fish and Game. The council tends to avoid meddling in state business as a matter of principle, unlike Wespac, which current and former chairs of the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources have criticized for overstepping.

David Witherell, the North Pacific Council's executive director since 2017, said that early course correction on salmon "set the conservation ethic in motion." It's part of what brought him to Alaska roughly 30 years ago to work on the council's staff.

He started his career as a biologist in Massachusetts, and recalled giving his stock assessment report to the New England Council.

"They weren't quite as responsive to hearing there was overfishing going on," he said. "I wanted to find a place that would give me a meaningful career, and had heard science was important to the management here. I came to Anchorage just for the job."

## **Pushing Pacific Policies For 'Ocean Health'**

On a brisk summer evening in Sitka National Historical Park, commercial longliner Linda Behnken has time for another lap around the trail that leads through the coastal forest, taking advantage of a sun that won't set for another few hours.

She made the island fishing community her home not long after her first trip to Alaska in 1982. She worked as crew on fishing boats and fell in love with the lifestyle. But she grew worried about some of the harmful effects of fishing that she was seeing so she went back to school on the East Coast to learn more about what she might be able to do to help. She eventually earned a master's degree at Yale.

“I wanted to be able to be involved in policy and be a better advocate for ocean health,” said Behnken, who served on the North Pacific Council from 1992 to 2001 and is the current executive director of the [Alaska Longline Fishermen’s Association](#).



Linda Behnken, a commercial longliner in Sitka, has advocated for sustainable fishing practices in Alaska.

Last year, she won the prestigious Heinz Award for the Environment for her advocacy work promoting sustainable fishing practices while bolstering rural Alaskan fishing communities, according to a North Pacific Council [news release](#).

Standing on the dock in Sitka next to the F/V Woodstock, her family’s 40-foot longline boat, Behnken said the natural rotation of executive directors at the North Pacific Council has fostered fresh ideas to solve new and long-standing problems.

“It’s easy for someone who’s been in that position so long to think they know what’s best ... and just have too much influence and leverage,” she said.

No other council has had an executive director serve longer than Kitty Simonds, who has led Wespac since 1983. While critics have called for her resignation for decades over concerns of mismanagement and improper lobbying on behalf of the commercial fishing industry, her experience does yield certain benefits. Her relationships, fostered over time with the politically powerful in Washington, D.C., and around the Pacific, can mean more resources for the region, and knowing the history of how the fisheries developed can help avoid past pitfalls.

Behnken said Witherell's approach is more about facilitating the council's meetings than controlling them. And he's improved the council's transparency in the process.

Wespac and Kitty Simonds, on the other hand, have long been criticized by environmentalists, federal auditors and some current and former council members for lack of transparency. While some improvements have been made, access to some basic budget information, like the general ledger, has proven difficult to access and some members of the public continue to feel left out.



The North Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, which has met virtually this year, received nearly 600 public comments at its April meeting.

All the regional councils now post basic information, like agendas and meeting minutes, on their websites along with background documents for certain agenda items and statements of financial interests.

But the North Pacific Council goes further. Witherell noted how the council has posted audio files of its meetings going back to 1976. Its current meetings are shared on YouTube, and in recent years the council established a Community Engagement Committee to identify and recommend strategies for the council to enact processes that provide effective community engagement with rural and Alaska Native communities.

Wespac, meanwhile, has often done the minimum to make sure the public is involved and up to speed. The council has broadcast its weeklong meetings online only since the pandemic forced meetings to be held virtually, but they aren't archived for the public to access later. The meetings are generally

several hours long each day and held during regular business hours, which makes attendance challenging.

Wespac has no audio files of its meetings available on its website and some recordings have been difficult or [impossible to obtain](#) even when requested under the Freedom of Information Act.

Moreover, Wespac is arguing against making its discussions easier to access. In October, Wespac shared those concerns with Congressmen Ed Case and Jared Huffman as part of their consideration of [proposed updates to the Magnuson-Stevens Act](#) that would require more transparency.

Among other things, Simonds said that “including audio/video/transcripts on the Council’s website would need to consider privacy and consent laws and may also discourage full discussion and participation by both members and the public.” She added that “there are concerns of discussions being taken out of context as well as inadvertent comments being captured on audio or in transcripts.”

## ‘The Power Of Their Voice’

In her office above [Old Harbor Books](#) in downtown Sitka, Heather Bauscher sits at a desk covered with literature from current and former environmental campaigns, books like “Fishing for the Future” and “Nickel and Dimed,” along with a reusable water bottle and calendars.

On the walls are posters of bird migrations, stickers that promote gutting fish not forests, and a black-and-white illustration of Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy, the word “oosik” above his head. An oosik is the bone from a walrus penis and Dunleavy is no friend of the environment so, well, you get the picture.

But a chart on the wall clearly sums up her work for the [Sitka Conservation Society](#): “mobilize everyone.”

She travels throughout the region organizing with fishermen and local tribes. She helps connect the dots between a timber proposal in the Tongass, for instance, and its effect on salmon runs.



Heather Bauscher of the Sitka Conservation Society has worked to mobilize the public to get involved in the council process.

She views the trawlers as “the big oil of fishing,” given the millions of pounds of bycatch they haul in while plying the Bering Sea or other waters for pollock.

Bauscher had her share of frustrations with the North Pacific Council, believing it went too far recently when it started moderating public comments after a few profane remarks at a meeting. But she’s generally had a positive experience despite the room for improvement she sees in the public’s ability to participate.

“I try to show people the power of their voice,” she said. “The average person cannot sit on a Zoom call for five days straight.”

The North Pacific Council received nearly 600 public comments at its April meeting. Only a handful of people comment at Wespac meetings, if anyone does at all. That’s been attributed to not feeling welcome to share input that goes against commercial fishing interests and the broader challenge in understanding the often complex and acronym-heavy nature of the meetings.

The pandemic may be nudging Wespac toward fostering a more inclusive environment though.

During a meeting in May of all eight regional councils’ leaders, Simonds said one thing that has stood out to her from going all virtual was increased participation. She said fishermen from the neighbor islands have called in,

whereas in the past they wouldn't be able to afford to fly over to attend meetings on Oahu or those held in the territories. And she said the "enviros" had been joining, like Pew, The Ocean Foundation, Conservation International and Earthjustice.

"Once we went virtual they have all been on our meetings, making comments, and maybe we're working well together," Simonds said.

NOAA Fisheries Deputy Director Sam Rauch, who signs off on the regional councils' policies and is familiar with Wespac's often strained relationship with environmental groups, was encouraged.

"I'm pleased to know, Kitty, that you're going to get along with the environmental groups from now on," he said at the meeting.

## **'Stacking The Deck'**

The North Pacific Council's conservation-minded ethics have their limits. It's still a council dominated by the commercial fishing industry, after all, and that scale only gets heavier with business-minded administrations.

Theresa Peterson, fisheries policy director for the [Alaska Marine Conservation Council](#), lost her seat on the North Pacific Council this year despite strong support from Alaska Natives and rural fishing communities. She lives in Kodiak, a one-hour flight south of Anchorage. It's home to the state's most diverse fishing fleet, and she's evidence of that — using different gears to fish for salmon, crab, halibut and cod.

Peterson, who'd been appointed in 2018 by former Gov. Bill Walker, an independent, said Republican Mike Dunleavy appointed two smart women from the processor sector to replace her and another community-based small boat fisherman from Homer.



The current Alaska governor has tilted the North Pacific Council more in favor of commercial fishing interests.

“Some of our positions were too conservation-minded, and there was interest in making sure large-scale operations were well represented,” she said. “I’m not a trawler’s best friend. But they’re really influential.”

Peterson said Dunleavy just has different values. She said she knew she didn’t have a chance at being appointed to a second three-year term after a speech he gave soon after taking office in December 2018, which was all about how Alaska is “open for business.”

The shift has renewed conversations about whether the regional councils should mandate seats for certain groups that represent particular interests.

Behnken, the Sitka longliner, said her organization had long opposed the idea of different fishing sectors or special interest groups each having a designated seat on the council but is now opening up to the idea.

“We always felt the best person should be appointed who meets the criteria for the job and diversity goals,” she said, adding that seemingly everyone could claim to be a conservationist so what’s the point.

This is the first year she feels that changing, noting how the industrial trawlers have the worst records on bycatch but have lobbyists to look out for their interests.

Tillion was not a fan of changing the law to mandate equal representation among stakeholder groups. He said it’s not in anyone’s interest, including the commercial fishermen, to deplete the resource.

He said he eagerly helped load up the council with representatives from the fishing industry when given the chance in the 1970s and 1980s, and recalled a conversation with the late Sen. Warren Magnuson about it.

The senator told him that he was “stacking the deck,” which Tillion said made him laugh. He said he told Magnuson that he gave him the deck, so what did the senator expect would happen.

“Naturally I’m going to stack it,” Tillion said. “You want fishermen involved in managing fish.”

But back then, Tillion said, the commercial fishermen he helped stack the deck with voted to keep the fishery closed until the salmon stock had recovered, rather than run it into the ground.

Back in Homer, dozens of fishing boats ride the gentle tides in the boat harbor at the end of the iconic spit — a 4.5 mile finger of land jutting into Kachemak Bay. It’s jam-packed in summer with fishermen who work the short season and earn enough to support their families all year in just a few months.

In Alaska, the fishing industry’s presence is everywhere. From the crews in rubber boots and slickers that crowd the Salty Dawg Saloon on Homer Spit to the chalkboard signs in front of restaurants around Anchorage that beckon with crab leg specials, halibut cheeks and king salmon.

Fishing ports are busy, bustling with an industry that feeds millions of people around the world but the harbors also make space for even the most battered boat that works just well enough to bring back dinner for family and friends.

For Clem Tillion, the most important thing the fishery council can do is make sure the fish will still be around for generations to come. It's important for the economy but also for the people.

"If we did it well, then they'd be the ones to cash in on it."