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Senate bill would divvy up market for crab harvest

By Hal Bernton
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An amendment tacked onto a Senate appropriations bill late yesterday sets the stage for sweeping changes in Alaska's lucrative and notoriously competitive crab industry.

The amendment, drafted by Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, authorizes harvesting shares for vessel owners and vests processors — largely based in Seattle — exclusive rights to purchase most of the Bering Sea's crustacean bounty.

Among the more than two dozen processors that would receive purchase rights, the biggest winner is likely to be Ballard-based Trident Seafoods. Estimates compiled last year suggested Trident could end up with as much as 20 percent of the crab purchase rights of a harvest that last year was worth more than \$120 million.

Many of the most successful vessel owners, who would receive the biggest shares of the Bering Sea king and snow crab harvest, are based in Washington.

The amendment — added to an appropriations bill for the departments of Commerce, Justice and State, the judiciary, and related agencies — authorizes the changes to take effect in 2005. Industry officials who have backed the changes hope to improve safety and profitability in a harvest that in recent decades has ranked among the deadliest in the nation.

Under the new system, vessel owners would have individual quotas, calculated as a percentage of the harvest. Skippers can claim their quotas by setting baited traps on the bottom of the Bering Sea, or sell their quotas to the highest bidders.

The shift to the vessel quota system had widespread support among crabbers.

"We have been working on this program for 15 years," said Arni Thomson of the Alaska Crab Coalition, which represents about 50 vessel owners. Thomson said the quota program would improve safety by allowing fishermen more time to catch their allotment, and less crab would be wasted.

Thomson also supports the processor shares. But that provision has triggered intense controversy within the industry and Alaska coastal communities

"It will be a cartel," said Gordon Blue, Sitka-based crabber. "It will leave Western Alaska communities and harvesters hostages to the processors."

In an earlier interview Trident's president, Chuck Bundrant, said that if fishermen deserved rights to catch a public crab resource, then the companies that pioneered the processing deserved rights to purchase the catch. But a Justice Department review released last week opposed the processor share plan as unwieldy and liable to raise processed-crab prices "without any countervailing efficiency benefits."

The amendment also has been opposed by conservation groups, who have said that any vesting of individual harvest rights should be linked to resource conservation measures. They will seek to halt the measure on the Senate floor.

"There has been no opportunity for debate or deliberation," said Dorothy Childers of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council. "It's like Congress is acting in the dark, and that should not be possible."

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