

COVID-19 Lessons

Alaska

Background of the Fisheries

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly challenged every link of the global seafood supply chain. While no fisheries have been spared, some have been able to protect workers and markets better than others. U.S. fisheries in Alaska were able to avoid major statewide outbreaks despite being uniquely vulnerable.

Alaska's seafood economy is massive by any measurement. In 2016 the state harvested 5.6 billion pounds of seafood with an ex-vessel value of \$1.7 billion which equates to a wholesale value of \$4.2 billion. Most of those landings are exported, accounting for a staggering 12.9 billion servings of seafood in 2015. These enormous landings facilitate 56,800 jobs every year in the Alaskan seafood industry.

Alaskan fishing ports are remote destinations with relatively small year-round populations. Of the 56,800 Alaskan seafood jobs, less than half of those are assigned to Alaskan residents. The majority of the seafood workforce is seasonal, travelling to the state from all over the world, usually in the summer months, to prosecute high value fisheries like salmon, crab and pollock. Bristol Bay, an area with a year-round population of about 6,700, triples its population each May as the salmon fishing fleet arrives.

COVID-19's Impact

Less than 3 months after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a "global pandemic", thousands of workers were expected to arrive by airplane and boat to rural Alaskan communities for the 2020 salmon season. None of these fishing communities were equipped to combat even a minor coronavirus outbreak.

In an interview before the salmon season began in April, Norman Van Vactor, CEO of the Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC) explained, "As of today, if you need a ventilator, there is not one available in Bristol Bay. It's more than fair to say we do not have the medical capacity by any stretch of the imagination, to deal with this influx of 12,000 to 15,000 people that are planning to roll into Bristol Bay starting the first of May."

With only a few weeks to make preparations, the BBEDC and other community interest groups, indigenous Alaskan representatives, the seafood industry and state officials cobbled together a collection of health mandates and safety protocols that proved remarkably effective given the enormous potential risks. The primary goal was to protect local residents and indigenous communities. On July 15th, one month into the season, Bristol Bay reported only 61 positive COVID-19 tests amongst the region's 21 communities.

Lessons Learned

Lesson	Considerations
<p>The “bubble” philosophy was effective.</p>	<p>In the summer of 2020 the National Basketball Association (NBA) created a “bubble” on Walt Disney World’s property for its players, staff, and media in order to safely proceed with its season. The league managed to host 172 games in a three-month timeframe without a single positive COVID-19 test. Other professional sports leagues playing their season’s at the same time, but without a bubble, saw far more COVID-19 cases and were plagued by cancellations and financial losses.</p> <p>This is obviously an extremely expensive and unusual industry example, but Alaskan salmon fisheries created similar “bubbles” in many communities to separate their seasonal workforces from local residents, and for the most part they were similarly successful in blocking major outbreaks.</p> <p>The isolation of AK communities, which was initially seen as a challenge in terms of healthcare capacity to meet a major outbreak, actually served as an asset for isolating workforces and minimizing crowded situations.</p>
<p>Seafood industry investment in comprehensive healthcare provided peace of mind to its workers.</p>	<p>Alaska required its larger seafood companies and fishing organizations to provide comprehensive healthcare and medevac insurance for its workers and fishermen. This allowed them to operate freely knowing their employers had protective measures in place if infections occurred, and it helped minimize outbreaks.</p>
<p>The fishing industry communicated with a wide range of stakeholders to develop best practices.</p>	<p>This included private seafood companies, indigenous populations, local non-indigenous residents, and state policy makers. It also required buy-in from vessel owners and seasonal workers coming into the state.</p>
<p>Not every detail was carefully planned, and best practices slipped after a good start.</p>	<p>Coronavirus outbreaks amongst seafood workers became more frequent and deadly in Alaska as 2020 progressed, proving that some characteristics of these industries are inherently vulnerable to this type of pandemic. Seafood processing facilities and fishing vessels are almost always cramped, cold, wet work spaces that leave no room for appropriate social distancing. It also showed that an easing in the initial vigilance in policy making was a mistake. Stories of worker displacement and poor planning became more frequent after the 2020 salmon season ended.</p>

Resources

Alaska:

- [COVID-19 Impact Reports](#) - AlaskaSeafood.org
- [Alaska Seafood COVID-19 Briefing Paper](#) - AlaskaSeafood.org
- [COVID-19 AID](#) - Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association
- [COVID-19 Information](#) - Bristol Bay Borough
- [Wild Harvest Covid-19 Recommendations](#) - Alaska Department of Fish and Game
- [Timeline: Looking back at six months of COVID-19 in Alaska](#) - KTOO Alaska
- ['Everybody's Worst Nightmare:' Bering Sea Fishermen On Edge As COVID-19 Shuttters Second Plant](#) - KUCB Alaska
- [Protecting Alaska's fisheries in a turbulent season](#) - Anchorage Daily News
- [Dunleavy and coastal mayors: Job well done on a difficult season](#) - National Fisherman
- [Alaska now to offer vaccines to nonresident seafood-industry workers hit by coronavirus outbreaks](#) - Seattle Times

Workers:

- [Protecting Seafood Processing Workers from COVID-19](#) - Center for Disease Control (CDC)
- [Checklist for Seafood Processing Worksites](#) - CDC
- [Steps to Reducing Worker Exposure to COVID-19](#) - OSHA
- [Recommendations for factories to protect workers from COVID-19](#) - ETI
- [ETI Base Code](#) - ETI

COVID-19 Best Practices:

- [The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Blue Economy: New Challenges and Prospects for Recovery and Resilience](#) - UNCTAD
- [COVID-19's impact on the seafood industry](#) - Stockholm Resilience Center
- [Emerging COVID-19 impacts, responses, and lessons for building resilience in the seafood system](#) - WorldFish