



# PELAGIC TRAWL GEAR DEFINITION AND INNOVATION

## NPFMC JUNE 2025 PREP

*This DRAFT brief provides background on the Pelagic Trawl (PTR) Gear Definition RIR and the PTR Gear Discussion Paper action items that will be discussed at the June 2025 Council meeting in Newport, OR. These items will be reviewed by the AP and Council per the June 2025 Schedule. While PTR will be discussed under one Agenda Item C3, it will be broken out into different topics for review:*

- a) innovations development – update*
- b) Process for implementing innovations – Discussion paper*
- c) Gear Definition analysis – Initial Review/Final Action*
- d) a tentative Enforcement Committee update.*

### Why does this issue matter?

The PTR fleet is estimated to be on the bottom 70%-100% of the time for Catcher Processors and 20%-60% for smaller Catcher Vessels. However, the PTR fleet is allowed to fish in areas closed to bottom trawling, which has significant negative impacts for vulnerable crab and salmon and their habitat. **The PTR definition and performance standard are not effectively limiting seafloor contact in important habitat areas.** This definition should be updated to increase transparency and enforceability in management.



### Tracking the Council issue back in time.

**Before 1990** - PTR definition contained a measure intended to prohibit parts of the gear contacting the seafloor.

**1990** - “Due to problems with enforceability,” NPFMC passed new legislation.

**1993** - NPFMC added a performance standard that redefined PTR based on the physical characteristics of gear.

“The underlying objective of the 1993 PTR gear definition is to reduce halibut and trawl bycatch by discouraging or preventing trawl operations on the sea bed when halibut and crab PSC allowances have been reached. The “trawl performance standard,” was intended to help accomplish this objective (58 FR 17196).

**Recent conversations at the Council and Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) confirm that the PTR definition and performance standard are not compliant with current fishing practices and are still not enforceable.**

**June 2023** – Council requested NMFS and OLE work with staff/industry to identify revisions to the regulatory definition of PTR gear to clarify that the codend is not intended to be regulated, allow for gear innovation, resolve any inconsistencies in current regulations and/or outdated regulations.

**February 2024** – Council chose to NOT take any action on BBRKC habitat protections and instead called for a discussion paper on gear innovation and recommendations for regulatory revision to the definition.

**October 2024** – Council reviewed the PTR Definition Analysis and Discussion Paper and advanced a motion with a revised purpose, need, and alternatives.

**June 2025** – Council will review the updated PTR RIR and Innovation Discussion Paper. The Council will select preferred or final alternatives as the PTR definition. It is less clear what the Council will do with regards to the Innovation Discussion Paper.

# PTR DEFINITION REVIEW

**The October 2024 motion updated the purpose and need with two key components:**

1. **Physical gear descriptors:** “update the regulatory definition of pelagic trawls in Alaska to clearly allow commonly used components in codends and bycatch excluder devices, allow instrumentation necessary to monitor and adjust net performance, and remove unnecessary outdated text.”
2. **Need to clarify definition:** “The definition of pelagic trawl gear within 50 CFR 679.2 has remained unchanged since 1993. Clarifying the definition of pelagic trawl gear will also facilitate the process to incentivize trawl gear innovation or other measures to minimize the impacts of pelagic trawl gear on bycatch, sensitive habitat, and unobserved mortality.”

## Potential Talking Points:

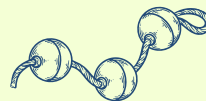
*There is room to address this issue specifically within the second component of the October 2024 motion of purpose and need.*

**The intended function of PTR gear (particularly in relationship to the seafloor) must be clarified** so that regulators and stakeholders know the baseline standard of operation from which to base fishing practices, management, and enforcement.

If PTR is intended to continue operating on the seafloor, it **should be redefined as a mobile bottom contact gear.**



If the NPFMC will not redefine PTR gear as mobile bottom contact gear, then the **PTR fleet should not be allowed to operate in areas closed to bottom trawling until they can demonstrate they are off bottom.**



Without this definition clarification, **there is no way to ensure the PTR fishery is accountable to any management, performance standard or conservation objectives.**

## PTR Innovation Discussion Review

The February 2024 motion “tasks staff with a discussion paper to inform options for incentivizing pelagic trawl gear innovation with the following objectives: minimizing bycatch to the extent practicable, minimizing the impacts of pelagic trawl gear on sensitive benthic habitat and unobserved mortality of stocks that rely on such habitat, improving or maintaining fishing efficiency, flexibility for trawl gear innovation within the constraints of other objectives (e.g., adapting to new technologies).”

### Potential talking points:

*Innovation but must be paired with accountability and performance objectives for PTR gear.*

*Bottom contact sensors may prove to be a useful tool in evaluating bottom contact time and impacts to habitat.*