

Assessment of Trawl Third Wires as a Threat to Seabirds, Including the Endangered Short-tailed Albatross (323)

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What is Bycatch?

Bycatch is the fish and other animals accidentally caught by fishing operations. Some bycatch, or all of it, may be returned to the sea as waste, usually dead or dying. In Alaskan trawl fisheries, third wire sonar technology is used to monitor fishing nets and minimize bycatch. Third wire cables, which attach sonar instruments to the net, are 1-3 cm in diameter, dark, and difficult to see by birds searching the waters around trawlers for fish scraps or “offal”. Birds that have alighted on the water, unaware of the cable’s approach can collide with the wires. These birds may then be drug underwater and drown.

The Problem:

Bird bycatch has been a conservation and public relations problem for Alaskan fisheries over the last decade. We know from anecdotal reports that seabirds like albatrosses, shearwaters, and fulmars have been injured or killed due to third wire collisions in Alaskan trawl fisheries. The possibility exists that endangered seabirds, such as the Short-tailed albatross, may become entangled and injured by the trawl third wire as well. Although seabird deaths resulting from third wires are noted by fisheries observers in a daily logbook when they happen to see them, the magnitude of this problem is completely unknown and not currently measurable using the existing methods. Through research and collaboration between the fishing industry, universities, government, and non-government environmental organizations this problem can be solved.

The Project:

Recent studies indicate video monitoring is an ideal tool to observe and assess seabird/third-wire collision rates. Using video technology to monitor the rate at which birds interact with trawl third wires researchers can evaluate the risks of third wire encounters. As part of a continuing effort to work proactively with Alaska’s fishing industry to reduce seabird bycatch, especially of endangered short-tailed albatross, this project capitalizes on existing relationships between the fishing industry and the regulatory agencies. The goal is to identify risks to short-tailed albatross and other seabirds, and improve estimates of seabird mortality. A report from this proposed study will prove beneficial to the efforts of other scientists trying to understand and resolve bycatch issues in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska ecosystem. Collaborative research between industry and regulatory agencies will result in the development of effective solutions to benefit both the birds and the fishing industry.

Photo by Valeria Teloni



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