

## New fisheries study launched

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By TOM HESSE

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**SITKA** — The Gulf of Alaska houses some of the most successful fisheries on the planet and more than 40 scientists are working on a multi-year study to help maintain that success.

The project is called the Gulf of Alaska Integrated Ecosystem Research Project.

“That ending there, the IERP,” research fisheries biologist Wyatt Fournier explained, “means that instead of the traditional method of going out and having a single species survey or a single species direction of study, we’re going to go out on this vessel and conduct full fisheries studies and oceanography surveys.”

The project’s focus is on the survival rates of pollock, Pacific cod, black cod, rockfish and the arrowtooth flounder, but Fournier, who works at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Juneau, said this study reaches a lot farther than traditional attempts at understanding those fish populations. Fournier is one of many scientists who have set out from Sitka to spend three weeks in the Gulf looking at data that could eventually change the way fish populations are understood.

“Typically we’ll have a survey that goes out and catches X amount of black cod at age two and then through a model ... they will then predict how many fish will be available in the future,” Fournier said. “There’s quite a bit of uncertainty to that.”

Part of the uncertainty comes from the fact that these species can’t be studied in a vacuum, he said. Rockfish interact with cod and arrowhead flounders interact with halibut, and they are all dependent on the amount of food available for other fish in the area and on climate change.

For example, one of the early hypotheses in the project is that decreases in halibut populations might be linked to increases in the numbers of other species.

“In the Gulf of Alaska, as our halibut populations have been declining and we’ve had some dips and trends in our cod population, the arrowtooth flounder has slowly been going up and up,” Fournier said. “It’s called the arrowtooth flounder because it has these sharp, sharp teeth that can eat anything, and so one of the hypotheses is that this arrowtooth flounder may be competing with some of our halibut or black cod or pacific cod or pollock.”

And that’s just one aspect of a multi-year study that will investigate everything from ocean salinity to what juvenile pollock are eating. Fournier serves as a field chief for the study in this region, which means part of his job is to help coordinate dozens of specialists who are coming together for this project.

“It is difficult. It requires quite a bit of funding,” Fournier said. “We’ve got three different research vessels this year on this project alone. We’ve got academics and federal employees working side by side, but getting all those people together and to get them boat time is tough. The logistics are very complicated.”

The research receives funding on a year-to-year basis and began with a pilot study in 2010. At around \$18 million in funds, the study is the most exhaustive done in the region.

Fournier said the research will help provide information about how fish populations are affected by changing climate, providing information that can then be used by fisheries managers for better planning.

“Our goal is to get more information so that we can build better models to continue harvesting without over-harvesting,” Fournier said.

Some of the information is an expansion of previous knowledge, but some of the things that are being studied have never been researched before. Fournier pointed to how weather affects ocean conditions. Changing weather patterns affect the oceans just as they affect the climate on land.

“The climate actually has a large impact on ocean conditions,” Fournier said. “As we experience something here on land that same change is influencing marine environment as well.”

That means that when fisheries managers are looking at the survival of young fish, they also need to understand the other factors affecting the fish. The current system calls for single species-stock assessments. Fournier said it’s not the best system because it doesn’t show the full picture.

“What we’re trying to do is take out some of the uncertainty from those single-species stock assessment models and try to understand the mechanisms of how the ocean environment is influencing or controlling the survival of these little fish,” Fournier said.

A lot of research remains to be done on the project, which is dependent on funding continuing. In the end, Fournier said, they’re hoping that the work they produce will help fisheries managers make better decisions about fish harvesting in the Gulf of Alaska.

“This is all very new stuff. We’re very excited. We’ve got a lot of papers we’re going to produce out of this and probably some reports that are going to be coming out in the next couple of years,” he said. “Our goal is to observe, report and increase the wealth of knowledge that our managers have.”

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