

Christine O'Connor - Record Comment in Support of Proposal 57

Rebuttal to Claims That Proposal 57 Is “Unnecessary”

Madam Chair and Members of the Board,

I submit these additional comments to directly address opposition arguments asserting that Proposal 57 is unnecessary because existing regulations already prohibit contact between drift and set gillnet gear.

That assertion is not correct and does not reflect the enforcement record.

Proposal 57 is necessary because existing regulations are insufficient to prevent recurring gear conflict, safety hazards, and economic loss in the Nushagak District.

Existing Regulations Do Not Prevent the Problem

Current regulations prohibit drift gillnet *web* from contacting set gillnet *web*. However, they do not prevent drift vessels and drift gear from conflicting with other setnet equipment essential to our operations, including running lines, anchoring devices, blocks, and buoys.

As a result, conflicts continue to occur regularly. These are not isolated incidents. They include:

- Nets being cut or damaged,
- Crews on the beach being placed at risk when lines under extreme tension recoil.
- Drift vessels and drift nets crossing setnet running lines,
- Anchoring devices being damaged or pulled,
- Buoys and marker lights being torn off,

If existing regulations were sufficient, these incidents would not continue to occur and be increasing in frequency.

Once damage occurs, enforcement options are limited, and the harm has already been done. Lost fishing time, lost tides, and lost income cannot be remedied after the fact.

Enforcement Confirms the Need for Clear, Preventative Rules

The Alaska Wildlife Troopers have confirmed that complaints regarding damage to setnet gear caused by vessels operating on top of setnets are among the most common enforcement calls they receive in this area. They also describe predictable scenarios in which vessels, influenced by wind and tide, are pushed into setnet gear while attempting to fish close to shore.

Importantly, the Alaska Wildlife Troopers support Proposal 57 because it reduces gear conflict and improves enforceability.

Proposal 57 Is a Preventative, Orderly Fishery Regulation

Proposal 57 does not rely on after-the-fact enforcement. Instead, it prevents conflict before it occurs by establishing clear, objective, and enforceable separation between set and drift gear. In other areas of the state gear types are separated, for example in Cook inlet there is a quarter mile separation. Ekuk is the only setnet fishery without a buffer zone or other spatial separation from other gear types.

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The proposal:

1. Uses offshore boundaries already defined in regulation, which are familiar to harvesters and enforcement.
2. Applies those same boundaries to drift operations, ensuring predictable separation.
3. Explicitly prohibits contact between drift equipment and setnet equipment, closing gaps that currently exist.

This approach reduces ambiguity, improves compliance, and allows enforcement officers to act decisively when violations occur.

Preventative clarity is not redundancy. It is good regulation.

Proposal 57 Improves Safety

Setnet operations in the Nushagak District occur under extreme tidal conditions, with large tidal fluctuations and strong currents. Setnet equipment is under constant tension. Any additional force introduced by a vessel or drift net dramatically increases the risk of damage to the setnet operation.

Proposal 57 reduces the likelihood of these dangerous interactions.

Conclusion

Proposal 57 is necessary because:

- Existing regulations do not prevent recurring gear conflict,
- Enforcement has confirmed ongoing problems,
- Damage and safety risks occur before enforcement can intervene,
- Clear separation is the most effective tool to restore order to this fishery.

This proposal promotes an orderly, enforceable, and safe fishery using boundaries already in regulation and ensures that different gear types can operate without conflict.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Board to adopt Proposal 57.

Respectfully submitted,

Christine O'Connor, Ekuk Setnetter
Member, Ekuk Beach Fishermen's Association