

*Bob Dooley*  
*President, United Catcher Boats*



Bob Dooley and his brother started fishing in Alaska's Bering Sea in 1978. By 1990, over-capitalization of the pollock fishery (too many boats, too little fish) had them and many others struggling to stay in business.

As the decade wore on, a new type of management policy was being talked about to restore sustainability and profitability to the fishery – a program called “catch shares.” Though he was barely making a living, Dooley resisted the new idea, which was to divide the catch among fishermen into shares that could be landed at any point throughout the season, rather than during an abbreviated season that forced them to operate under sometimes-unsafe conditions.

“At first we were going, well, I don't know if this is going to work,” said Dooley. “It was pretty tough. It was fear of the unknown. We didn't know what to expect. We didn't know how the quotas were going to work.”

So Dooley got involved in the process of designing the cooperative agreements that would govern how catch shares *did* work.

“We had to figure out how to allocate the fish among the boats – we didn't have a mandated allocation like they do now,” he said. As with many catch share programs, they decided to base it on each fisherman's catch history.

“We also had to help figure out what to do if you overharvest, catch someone else's fish without out permission. All the bylaws and rules, we had to put that together in short order. The rules prior to that were go out and catch all you could catch.”

Despite his initial hesitations, over time, Dooley could see that the new system was more efficient and held greater potential for profit than how he'd been operating in the past.

Because of the new catch limits, his cooperative started working closely with the processor to determine which fish were most needed at any given time. That's not something they could have done previously, with everyone racing just to get as many fish as possible before someone else got there first.

“You can’t play a quality game if everyone else is doing quantity,” he said. “But once you mandate the amount of fish each cooperative gets, then you know it’s not how many pounds but how much value you can extract from that fish that matters. So it forced us to fish smarter. We worked with our processor cooperatively, learned about what it took to bring better fish to the plant – not just any fish, but what the plant needed. They need better roe fish during roe time, they needed better-sized fish when the filet market was hot and that’s where the money was. Stuff we had never considered. We got production reports from the plants, so we knew what they were making so we had our report card as we went along. That whole process grew the value of the pie for us, not the amount of pounds we caught, but it grew what we could realize from it.”

Though each fisherman ended up able to catch fewer fish under the new system, Dooley said, in the end, it was more stable, more predictable and more profitable.

“You can no longer be displaced by someone else who fishes faster than you,” he explained. “But you can fish at a time when the processor wants the fish, when it’s more profitable, when it has more roe, for example. You get a bigger value per fish. We went from demanding a fixed price to negotiating a share of the revenue.”

“It took our revenues and drove them up and it was great. Things have been much better since then.”

So Dooley was ready when the west coast looked to implement a catch share program, and he used his Alaskan experience to help design a program for whiting.

“This wasn’t something that was shoved down our throats,” he said. “We’ve been very active in the creation and the development of it all the way through.”

But no two catch share programs are exactly alike. Dooley and others on the committee had to tailor this program to the specific issues surrounding whiting.

“The driving force in whiting is bycatch, constraining species,” he said. “Fish that don’t have much of a quota and are counted against you if you catch too many of them. Bycatch doesn’t work when you divvy it up at the individual vessel level. Any given year you might have a low quantity that can shut the fishery down, but not everybody catches the same amount of it. It’s based on luck somewhat. So what you do is you pool it, you have a cooperative on top of a cooperative, risk pools where people commit their share of bycatch to a common pool and then agree on the rules of engagement. Some areas, where you have a lot of bycatch, you can make those off limits to everyone. There are penalties for fishing there, but no penalties for exceeding bycatch limits if everyone plays by the rules. If by some chance as a group, you exceed the number, you all agree to stop fishing and you live with that.”

“We know what we have to catch. We have the ability to cooperatively work with our fellow fishermen and our processors. It works because you take cooperative responsibility for making it work.”

Dooley said the new system, launched in 2011, is working: bycatch rates have fallen. One reason is that the extended season allows fishermen to pick up and move if they are getting too much bycatch in one area. “You can look for an area that’s cleaner. You lose a little time, may even have to postpone your trip to a later date, but you don’t lose your quota.”

Another major benefit to the switch to catch shares is that Dooley is no longer tied to a specific start date for whiting. In the past, he had to bring his boat down from Alaska – a costly trip that uses 20,000 gallons of fuel and takes seven days – in order to be there when all the other boats would start the season on May 15, since everyone was competing for the same fish. Now, he can stay in Alaska for the pollock season (which starts in June) and make the trip south just once a year, in the fall, when the fish are a higher quality as well.

“Typically the fish is better in the fall, which is reflected in a better price,” he said. “There are so many pluses to this. You’re out there being a better steward of the resource. And having this product on the market year-round, supply is being meted out because of the staggered starts, so it tends to hold the price up. I think things are unbelievably better.”