

Sponsor Statement for HB 206

Vessel Limited Entry for Commercial Fisheries

An Act relating to a vessel-based commercial fisheries limited entry system, to management of offshore fisheries, and to the definition of 'person' for purposes of the commercial fisheries entry program; and providing for an effective date.

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HB 206 establishes a vessel-based commercial fisheries limited entry program. The bill preserves the State's current limited entry program as the primary form of limitation, and authorizes the Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission (CFEC) to implement a vessel-based limitation in a fishery only under certain tightly defined conditions.

In its bill enacting the Hair Crab moratorium in 1996, the Legislature recognized the need to establish a vessel-based limitation program and directed CFEC and the Department of Law to draft and bring to the Legislature legislation to accomplish that. Such legislation was drafted but failed to gain passage during the 21st Session. HB 206 reintroduces enabling provisions for this important fisheries management tool.

Under the current limited entry statute, CFEC may only issue limited entry permits to gear operators in a fishery, not to vessels or vessel owners. This type of limited entry system, based on an "owner-operator" model, is appropriate for fisheries where typically vessels are small and fished by one person usually in nearshore waters. But other fisheries in Alaska, particularly some of those in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea, are characterized by larger vessels fishing in offshore waters. These vessels move from area to area and may be operated by successive skippers hired by vessel owners to keep the vessel fishing throughout a season. Current law may not be appropriate or workable for this kind of fishery; in fact, it could potentially increase rather than limit the units of gear and not achieve the resource conservation and economic viability purposes of the Limited Entry Act. Further, it would award ongoing fishing privileges to many who have worked essentially as hired crew, and not those who have invested in the fishery.

The bill establishes the framework for a vessel-based limitation system, much as existing law provides the framework for the operator-based program. Effective fishery management tools, such as those authorized in HB 206, will help ensure the State has the flexibility to effectively manage a wide range of fisheries and, in some fisheries, to gain or retain State management authority in the years ahead.