

Fishing jobs down for a 5th year

7.6 percent loss in 2024 pushes total count to record low

By JOSHUA WARREN

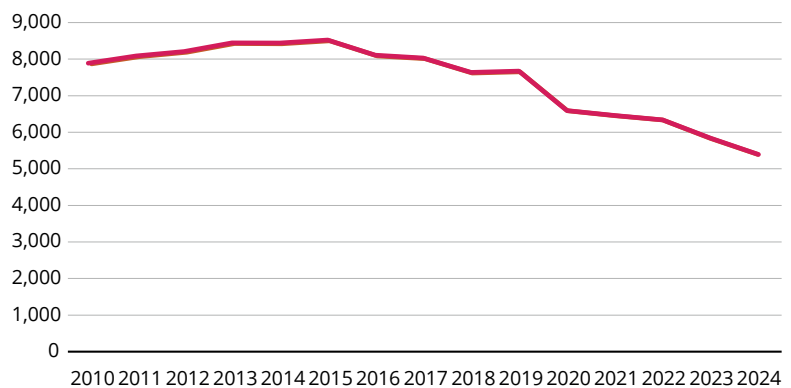
Alaska lost seafood harvesting jobs for a fifth straight year in 2024, bringing the industry to its lowest job count since data collection began in 2001.

The loss of 443 jobs, a 7.6 percent drop, was similar to the previous year's -7.8 percent.

November and December showed strong employment growth, but other than a minor gain in September, all other months were lower in 2024.

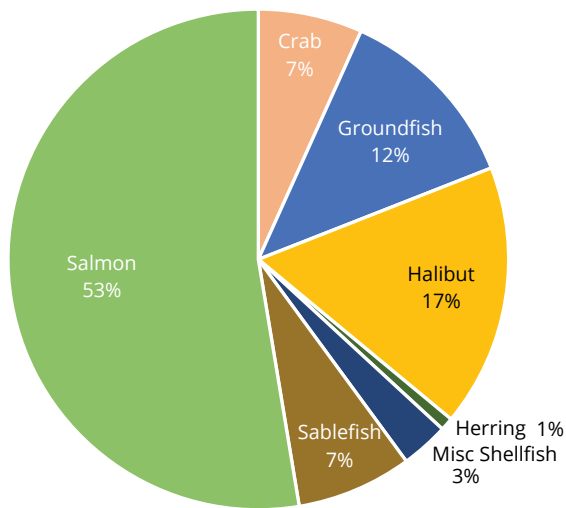
The late-year growth came across several species' harvests and regions, suggesting some recovery is possible in 2025, but those numbers won't be available until next year.

Alaska fishing employment continues to decline



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Work-intensive salmon harvesting represents majority of jobs, 2024



Sources: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section; Commercial Fisheries Entry Commission, and National Marine Fisheries Service

The decade loss and what's dragging on the industry

Seafood harvesting has lost more than a third of its total jobs in a decade, with fishing employment down every year of the last 10 except for 2019. The summer peak has fallen about 30 percent, from 24,600 jobs in July 2014 to 17,400 in July 2024.

The biggest declines came during the pandemic, but most other Alaska industries, including seasonal ones, have bounced back. Seafood harvesting has continued to struggle, facing several substantial obstacles.

Rising costs are one factor, and while high startup costs have likely deterred some new entrants, even current permit holders are fishing less as it becomes less profitable. The number of permit holders fishing has steadily declined since 2019, compounding job losses when related crew aren't needed.

The fleet has also gotten older over a decade, with permit holders' average age rising by 3.6 years to 53.4.

This article doesn't capture the U.S. tariffs that began in mid-2025, but the U.S. had already been losing global fisheries market share for several years. Countries such as Russia, which have lower costs,

have flooded the international market with competitively priced products. Seafood prices have been on a three-year slide, especially for high-value catches such as chinook salmon.

International trade is still shifting; for example, China is now purchasing more fish from Vietnam than from the United States. How the tariffs will affect these relationships isn't clear, but they will likely put additional pressure on prices as U.S. harvesters compete with countries that have more favorable trade deals.

On top of lower prices for their catches and rising costs, Alaska seafood harvesters continue to grapple with unpredictable runs, the volatility of climate change, seafood processing plant closures and sales, and disrupted fisheries.

Stocks of some species, such as sablefish, have boomed in recent years, but prices were too low to make large harvests worth the costs. Similarly, changing market demands have disrupted the economics of herring fisheries.

Some fisheries have closed earlier than usual in recent years or entirely, a list that varies from year to year. For example, the Bering Sea crab fisheries closed in 2022 and 2023 after stocks crashed 90 percent, then reopened in 2024 but with greatly reduced catch limits.

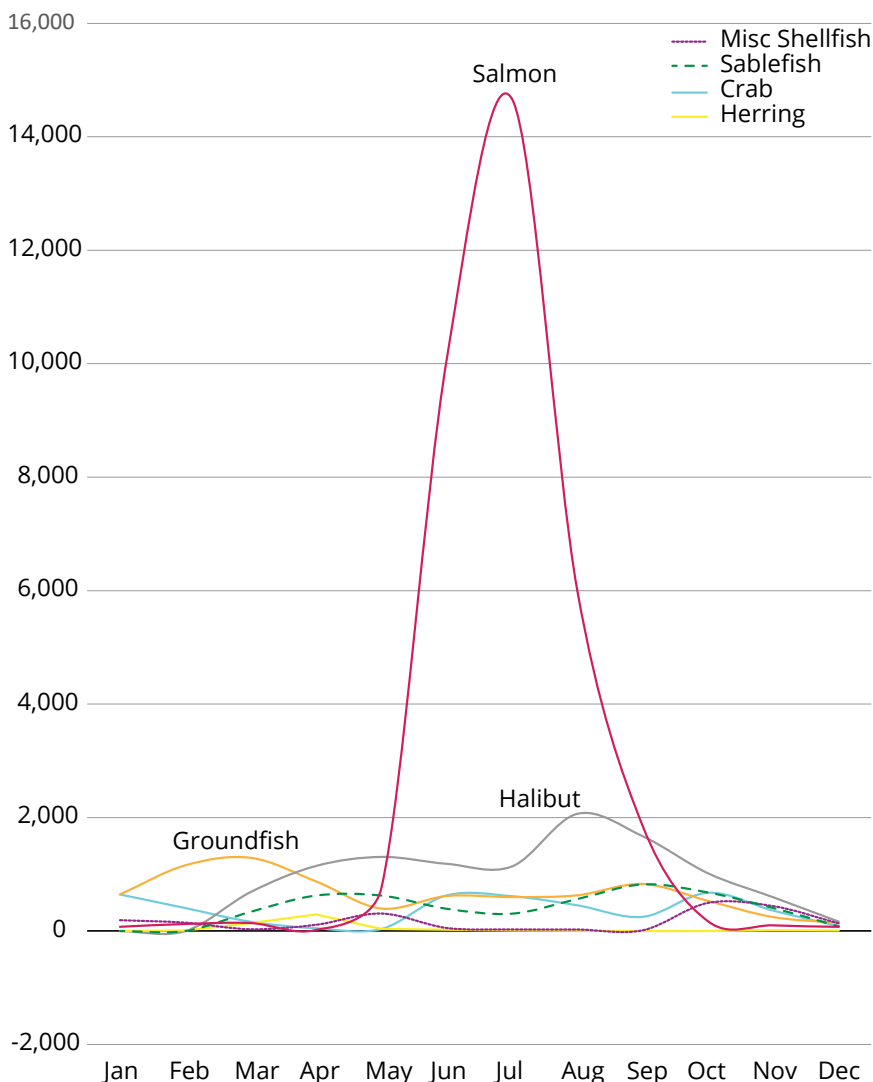
Another example is Yukon Delta salmon, which bottomed out this decade, eliminating those jobs. The fish still have not returned in sufficient numbers, even for subsistence fishing.

Fishing jobs by species harvested

Salmon 2nd for value, at a new low for jobs

Salmon harvesting had long been Alaska's

How fishing jobs are spread over the year, 2024



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

highest-value catch, but dramatically lower harvests in recent years pulled its value down to second place in 2023, where it remained in 2024.

Salmon fishing continues to drive the industry, however. It's so labor-intensive compared to other harvests that it represents more than half of fishing jobs. As a result, losses in salmon harvesting often drive the statewide losses, especially when declines are as sharp as they've been recently.

Like many of Alaska's fisheries, salmon harvesting hit a new employment low in 2024, at 2,837 total jobs — a decline of over 8 percent from 2023. The loss from 2022-2023 was even more dramatic at almost 11 percent.

Salmon harvesting employment has been dwindling for years, rising in only two of the last 10. Over the last decade, the total job count dropped 40 percent, and the monthly peak in July fell by 31 percent (from more than 21,000 jobs to under 15,000).

November and December job counts ticked up in 2024, suggesting gains for salmon in the early months of 2025 are likely. However, the winter salmon catches are typically in smaller fisheries than the harvests that generate the massive summer peaks.

Sablefish harvesting was down 9.3 percent

Sablefish, or black cod, followed the statewide downward trend, with employment falling 9.3 percent. That loss of 41 jobs brought the total to a new low.

Decreases came mostly in the summer, with June employment down by almost a third. Late-year gains eased that loss somewhat.

While sablefish is a groundfish, it's discussed separately from other groundfish because its workforce is so large relative to the other groundfish harvests.

Ongoing losses in other groundfish

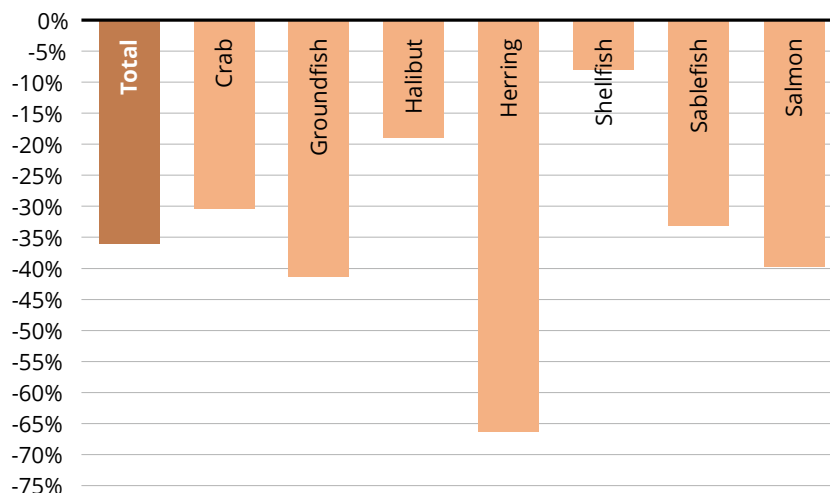
Groundfish makes up the majority of harvested poundage in Alaska, at around 5 billion in 2024, even with sablefish excluded. The "other groundfish" category is mainly pollock.

Groundfish harvesting dropped to a record low of 664 jobs in 2024, a loss of 11 percent from the previous year. The March peak was down by almost 300 jobs.

This category also showed end-of-the-year employment growth, with more groundfish harvesters working late in the year than ever. But even with those increases, aside from a small exception in 2022, groundfish harvesting has lost jobs every year since 2016. The decade's loss exceeded 41 percent.

Employment declines were due in part to large harvesters becoming more efficient, needing fewer jobs to bring in the same catch.

Decade change in harvesting jobs by species



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

Monthly peak for herring harvesters was half of what it was in April 2022

Herring harvests represent the smallest number of jobs. Most come in April, with minor activity the rest of the year. The April 2024 count was the lowest on record at just 294 jobs, down from more than 600 in April 2022.

With the peak month down so much, the yearly average also hit a low of 45 jobs, which was almost 22 percent lower than the previous year.

Herring harvesting has seen its ups and downs, with some high years during and after the pandemic. In general, though, the fishery has trended downward, generating 66 percent fewer jobs in 2024 than it did 10 years earlier.

Most herring is harvested in Southeast, and Southeast herring permits declined the most in 2024.

Halibut harvesting rose in the winter, but yearly job count began to decrease

Halibut was one of just two fisheries — herring being the other — to spring back from pandemic job lows quickly and approach normal levels in 2022.

Also like herring, halibut harvesting has begun to slide. Halibut fishing employment was 4.7 percent lower in 2024, a loss of 45 jobs.

The winter was again a bright spot, with halibut

Alaska seafood harvesting employment by month, 2001 to 2024

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Monthly Average
2001	2,972	4,286	4,505	4,681	7,053	18,884	21,571	13,921	8,095	6,194	2,617	726	7,959
2002	3,590	4,047	4,334	4,913	6,715	16,292	18,224	11,975	6,983	5,794	2,632	524	7,168
2003	3,284	3,609	4,378	5,797	6,233	17,610	19,670	11,922	7,191	5,969	2,660	526	7,404
2004	3,594	3,492	4,110	5,050	6,476	17,139	19,634	12,308	7,371	6,023	2,259	509	7,330
2005	3,561	3,150	4,227	5,115	6,283	18,169	20,566	12,889	7,192	4,958	2,768	953	7,486
2006	2,700	3,038	4,573	4,293	5,709	17,748	20,066	13,700	7,719	5,003	2,507	720	7,314
2007	2,584	2,966	3,930	4,348	5,949	17,528	20,137	13,567	7,500	4,738	3,080	791	7,260
2008	2,738	3,138	4,511	4,445	5,572	17,022	20,446	13,633	8,225	4,202	2,708	602	7,270
2009	2,527	3,817	3,126	4,874	5,693	17,609	20,076	13,687	7,148	4,593	2,388	507	7,087
2010	2,668	3,060	4,005	5,255	5,685	18,878	23,128	15,287	7,759	4,992	2,887	850	7,871
2011	2,898	3,214	4,010	4,729	5,642	20,112	23,824	15,586	7,918	5,721	2,303	849	8,067
2012	2,923	3,409	4,609	5,402	6,163	19,237	24,761	16,191	6,988	5,453	2,274	853	8,189
2013	2,736	2,930	4,091	5,516	6,270	22,012	25,351	15,419	7,559	5,496	2,780	930	8,424
2014	2,242	2,776	4,879	5,407	6,489	21,167	24,594	16,593	8,018	5,190	2,596	1,097	8,421
2015	2,520	3,247	4,961	5,029	6,749	21,164	24,649	16,283	8,232	5,252	2,661	1,264	8,501
2016	2,678	3,374	5,222	5,363	6,329	18,840	23,695	16,055	7,909	4,953	1,886	765	8,089
2017	2,205	3,076	4,444	5,026	5,646	19,881	23,541	15,407	8,562	5,334	2,292	754	8,014
2018	2,126	2,538	3,379	4,310	5,166	18,942	22,790	14,763	9,211	4,849	2,681	689	7,620
2019	2,347	2,548	3,637	4,372	4,721	18,154	23,440	15,632	8,664	5,201	2,468	689	7,658
2020	1,975	2,296	2,983	3,113	4,020	16,286	20,917	12,325	7,310	5,104	2,193	473	6,583
2021	1,573	2,339	3,305	4,017	3,997	15,732	20,627	11,616	6,995	4,017	2,268	902	6,449
2022	1,853	2,312	3,085	3,908	4,244	16,210	20,241	11,172	6,203	3,534	2,269	953	6,332
2023	1,643	2,313	3,184	3,583	4,152	14,540	18,204	11,055	5,286	3,742	1,757	571	5,836
2024	1,558	1,847	2,792	3,120	3,466	12,972	17,361	9,739	5,434	3,571	2,156	702	5,393

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

harvesting jobs recovering seasonally from the previous year's losses. November and December job counts both jumped by over 40 percent from 2023. Those are generally the smallest months; with zero activity in January and February, the late-year increases are unlikely to have continued into 2025.

Crab harvests bucked the trend, adding a modest number of jobs in 2024

Crab fisheries broke the loss trend in 2024, adding 17 jobs over the year — just over 5 percent growth — although the peak declined when Kodiak fisheries moved back to January and Bering Sea fisheries continued to shed jobs. Strong gains across most months made up for the February plunge, however.

While Bering Sea and Kodiak limits or closures had dragged on crab harvesting over the previous few years, 2024 showed signs of recovery. Bering Sea crab fisheries were closed in 2022 and 2023 after a 90 percent drop in biomass. They reopened in 2024, albeit with a drastically reduced catch limit, after stocks recovered somewhat.

For context, the typical limit for Bering Sea snow crab in years past was about 45 million. The 2024 limit was 4.72 million. However, that was bumped up to 9.3 million for 2025.

For detailed harvesting data, visit:
live.laborstats.alaska.gov/seafood

The Kodiak tanner crab fishery's catch limits have also tightened considerably in recent years.

Aside from the year's small overall employment gain, statewide crab harvesting has trended downward long-term, losing over 30 percent of its jobs from 2014 to 2024.

Big loss for shellfish, but decade decline was smaller than for other harvests

Shellfish harvesting covers shrimp, clams, scallops, octopus, squid, and sea cucumbers, and it is one of the smallest categories, representing about 500 jobs each October. Averaged over the year, that was 166 jobs for 2024, down 11.7 percent from 2023.

January and February fisheries added jobs with the February return of a geoduck fishery that had opened later in the year in 2023, generating jobs in the latter month.

Most of 2024's losses stemmed from exceptionally high employment in 2023. However, despite the decline, shellfish harvesting maintained a significant share of the previous year's job gains.

Unlike most species categories, shellfish harvesting employment remained above 2022 levels last year and has been comparatively stable over the long term, likely because of its variety of products and species. Over 10 years, its employment only declined by about 8 percent.

Fishing employment by region

Yukon Delta remained near zero

The Yukon Delta fisheries have evaporated over the last few years, and the remaining salmon harvesting jobs disappeared in 2021. The area's salmon fisheries have been essentially closed in recent years because escapement — the number of fish counted as they move upstream to spawn — has been too low to meet international treaty requirements.

Regional fishing employment continued to limp along with groundfish harvesting for a few years, but those jobs also vanished in 2024. That left the region with just two jobs in a single month, July, which used to have more than 1,600 people fishing.

Because subsistence fishing would be prioritized after being severely curtailed in the region, commercial fishing jobs appear unlikely to return any time soon.

Southeast lost 8 percent of its harvesting jobs after a flat 2023

Southeast is the only region with harvesting in all of the major species categories, including large salmon hauls. It provides the most commercial fishing jobs among regions, and its harvest diversity somewhat shelters the region from volatility.

Southeast's losses in 2024 were in line with the statewide numbers. The region lost 142 jobs over the year (-8 percent), including over 300 fewer jobs at the summer peak.

After a flat 2023, the 2024 loss brought Southeast to a record low. Regional harvesting employment has dropped almost 30 percent since 2014, with much of that over the COVID years, from which Southeast harvesting hasn't recovered despite a bump in 2021.

In Southeast, only the crab harvest added jobs in 2024, driven by a summer employment recovery and summer and winter harvests both stretching into additional months for some permit holders.

How we use landings to estimate seafood harvesting jobs

Unlike the wage and salary job numbers we and our federal partner the Bureau of Labor Statistics publish each month, data on the employment fish harvesting generates are not readily available. Harvesters considered are self-employed, and permit holders aren't required to report the number of people they hire in the same way as employers subject to state unemployment insurance laws.

To estimate fisheries employment that's roughly comparable to wage and salary job numbers, we infer jobs in a given month from landings. A landing, or the initial sale of the catch, signals recent fishing activity.

Because fishing permits are associated with a specific type of gear, including boat size, we know roughly how many people a landing requires under various types of permits. The number of people associated with a certain permit is called the crew factor.

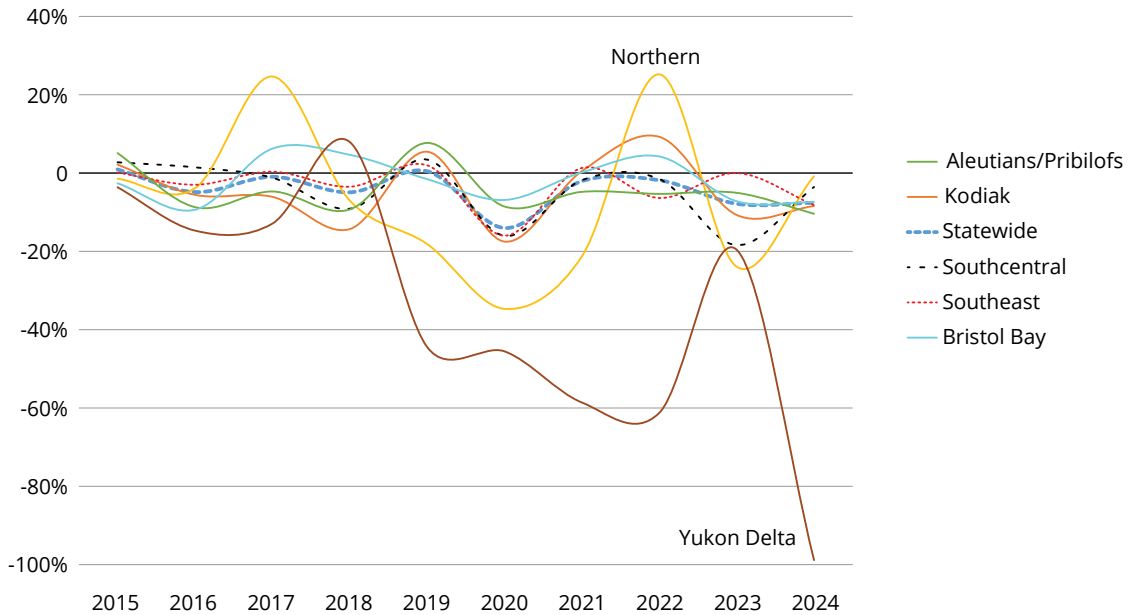
For example, a permit to catch king crab in Bristol Bay with pot gear on a vessel more than 60 feet long requires about six people, according to a survey of

those permit holders. So when crab is landed under that permit, we assume it generated six jobs that month. We count each permit once per month regardless of the number of landings, which is similar to the way wage and salary employees work different numbers of hours.

Most permits designate where specific species can be harvested, so we assign jobs to the harvest location rather than the residence of the permit holder. This approach also best approximates wage and salary employment, which is categorized by place of work rather than residence. Jobs generated under permits that allow fishing anywhere in Alaska receive a special harvest area code and are estimated and allocated differently.

We produce the job counts by month because, as with location, that comes closest to wage and salary employment data. And because seafood harvesting employment is much higher in summer than winter, similar to tourism and construction, averaging employment across all 12 months allows for more meaningful comparisons among job counts in different industries.

Percent change in regional fishing employment, 2015 to 2024



Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section

While summer employment sometimes doesn't bleed into August, which can lower the year's job count, August showed some activity in 2024, and Southeast's crabbing employment jumped by over 13 percent for the year.

All of Southeast's other fisheries lost jobs, with some hitting new lows, including salmon, sablefish, and herring. The reductions came through widespread decreases in total harvest volume as well as jobs.

Each Southeast species category showed job growth in just a few months last year while shrinking overall. In the past, sharp decreases tended to come from a specific fishery closure, but 2024 losses were widespread.

Southcentral's decline was relatively minor, and some fisheries grew

Southcentral's loss was the smallest of the top three fishing regions at -3.5 percent, or 39 fewer jobs over the year. Several Southcentral fisheries added jobs in 2024, which dulled the impact of the larger fisheries' reductions.

Salmon is the region's powerhouse, and it produced a mix of job losses and gains over the summer. Unlike most regions, July's peak was higher than in 2023 (300 jobs). Months on either side of that peak were lower, however, reflecting a more focused season and a lower average for the year.

Despite the higher salmon harvesting peak, salmon fishing in Southcentral hit a record employment low in 2024, as did sablefish. While the sablefish fishery added some jobs late in the year, it declined in almost every other month. The total loss topped 18 percent.

Job losses were also steep for other groundfish, but some small species showed recovery. Miscellaneous shellfish and herring harvesting both recovered from their 2023 job losses. Halibut didn't quite reach previous levels, but its Southcentral job count still grew almost 3 percent in 2024.

Crab closures in the area continued, so its job count remained at zero.

Kodiak fishing employment dropped by over 8 percent, mainly because of salmon

Kodiak lost 8.4 percent of its seafood harvesting jobs in 2024 (-45). While some of the smaller fisheries bounced back from the previous year, the fisheries that provide the lion's share of employment, such as salmon, fell to record lows.

Kodiak salmon fishing employment plunged almost 23 percent in 2024 after dropping nearly 10 percent the year before. As recently as 2019, July and August salmon harvests both topped 1,000 jobs, but the current high-water mark is 761.

Over the last 10 years, Kodiak salmon fishing has

lost over 40 percent of its jobs.

The second-largest category, other groundfish, fell 12 percent over the year. Although that loss was smaller in comparison to larger Kodiak fisheries, it still brought groundfish harvesting jobs to a new low.

The remaining Kodiak species saw mostly strong recovery after losses in 2023. Halibut harvesting employment increased by 8.5 percent, and sablefish by a whopping 63 percent, with the return of winter longline fishing. That marked a complete recovery from the previous year's loss.

While crab harvesting didn't rise as much as it did in other regions, it held steady. The local Bairdi tanner crab fishery moved one month earlier, which shifted the distribution but didn't change the total job count.

Small Northern job count barely budged

The Northern Region has little seafood harvesting, 69 jobs in 2024, and it's mainly in the summer. Most harvesters catch salmon and crab, but the halibut fishery's growth was almost enough to cancel out the salmon losses, making the region's annual decline just -0.8 percent.

Northern salmon harvesting lost almost 13 percent of its jobs over the year, with decreases in every month but one, and the September increase only came from a few harvesters extending their season further than the previous year.

Northern crab harvesting was strong in most months, pushing the job count to its highest level since 2018. Crabbing hasn't yet regained the heights of the early 2010s, but it has increased every year for the last four. The Northern Region's small crab harvest has remained insulated from the closures that have hit most of its southern neighbors.

Bristol Bay took another big hit in 2024

Last November's report noted Bristol Bay had lost its remaining harvesting jobs outside of salmon, and that remained true in 2024.

Salmon is caught in Bristol Bay for just a few months, and employment was lower in all of them. The July peak fell 400 jobs below 2023, with fewer set net and drift net permits.

The region is typically known for its fishing stability, but jobs hit a new low in 2024 after dropping 7.4 percent on top of the previous year's 6.9 percent loss.

The number of Bristol Bay permits fished in 2024 was more than 100 below 2023, with harvesters likely dissuaded by low salmon prices and declines or closures of other fisheries. In the past, some harvesters with permits for other areas and species have fished on their way to Bristol Bay, but it appears fewer decided to make the trip last year.

Aleutians/Pribilofs lost 10 percent in a year

Groundfish is the dominant species in the Aleutians and Pribilof Islands, the only region where salmon harvesting isn't the top fishing employer.

Jobs in all of the region's fisheries decreased in 2024, with a 10.4 percent loss pulling employment down to the lowest level on record. Harvesting dipped below 1,000 jobs in 2024 for the first time.

Sablefish and halibut are among the largest regional fisheries, and they were also the hardest hit. Both had at least 20 percent fewer harvesters in 2024.

Other groundfish didn't fare much better, with a 7.4 percent loss on top of the 6.5 percent drop the year before, also bringing the area's largest fishery to its lowest-ever level.

While salmon is a smaller fishery in the Aleutians, it represents the most jobs during the summer. The summer salmon peak has fallen from almost 1,100 jobs a decade ago to below 900 in 2024.

Salmon fishing employment has declined every year for the last three years and by 20.4 percent over the decade.

Joshua Warren is an economist in Juneau. Reach him at (907) 465-6032 or joshua.warren@alaska.gov.