Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Crab

King crab, snow crab supplies low

Supplies of king crab are envisaged to be tight in 2024, mainly because the fishery in the Bering Sea is closed. Landings in the Russian Federation are good but as Russian king crab is banned from the North American market, these supplies are going mainly to Asia. Snow crab supplies are slightly better and demand is good.

Supplies

The king crab fishery in the Barents Sea may also be in trouble. The Norwegian Institute of Marine Research (IMR) had performed a survey of the area in 2023 and found a significant decline in the king crab population. Consequently, the IMR had recommended that the 2024 quota be cut by a hefty 60 percent to 966 tonnes, down from 2 375 tonnes in 2023. This recommendation was confirmed by the Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries just before Christmas.

With regard to snow crab, in mid-December 2023, the Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries announced an increase of 32 percent in the 2024 quota in the Barents Sea, to 10 300 tonnes. In addition, the annual fishing moratorium will be extended by a month and will now run from 1 July through 30 November 2024.

The US State of Alaska re-opened the Bristol Bay red king crab fishery on 15 October 2023, following a two-year closure due to a decline in stocks over the prior several years. Pressure on the authorities had been mounting to re-open the fishery; however, the quota is relatively low at just 2.6 million pounds (1 180 tonnes), down from the 3.8 million pounds (1 724 tonnes) quota in 2019.

The Alaska snow crab population in the Eastern Bering Sea declined by 50 percent from 2018 to 2019, and further in the following years. While this drop came as a surprise to some in the industry, scientists have concluded that it was caused by a marine heatwave in 2018 – 2019.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States is undertaking annual surveys of the snow crab population in the Bering Sea. In 2018, the NOAA estimated that the snow crab population in the Bering Sea amounted to 12.2 billion crabs. In 2019, the number had dropped to just five billion individuals. In 2020 there was no survey because of the COVID-19 pandemic; but in 2021, the snow crab population had dropped to just over 1 billion. Needless to say, this has caused much concern among the crabbers, and the outlook is not good at all.

In early November 2023, Alaska's Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) announced that their advice on the guideline harvest levels for the tanner crab fishery off Kodiak Island would be set at three million pounds (1 379 tonnes), a 48 percent cut compared to the 2023 TAC of 5.8 million pounds (2 630 tonnes). In 2023, the combined harvest levels for Kodiak, the South Peninsula and Chignik were set at 7.3 million pounds (3 310 tonnes), making them the largest crab fisheries in Alaska.

Regarding Dungeness crab, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) announced just before Christmas 2023 that the fishery in northern California would open on 5 January 2024, after having been delayed since mid-November 2023 because of humpback whale migration. The opening of the Dungeness crab fishery in Oregon was also delayed. It was scheduled to open on 1 December 2023 but was delayed for a few weeks because of low meat yield.

Market

The popularity of frozen ready-to-eat seafood products in China is growing rapidly, and this also includes crab products. Consumers point out that compared to the traditionally-preferred live crab, frozen products are about half the price, and the taste is just as good. This sector is expected to grow strongly in Chinese urban areas.

The limited availability of king crab and snow crab in the US market, and the resultant rising prices, do not seem to be discouraging consumers from buying crab. On the contrary, US consumer interest in king crab and snow crab is on the upswing.

The decline in the Bering Sea crab fisheries could lead to future market problems for the Alaska industry. Climate change, irregular harvests, and delays in opening seasons because of whale migration has made this fishery unreliable to the extent that buyers must depend on other fisheries such as the snow crab fishery in Eastern Canada, for future supplies.

International trade

The global crab trade (all types and product forms) increased by 11.2 percent during the first nine months of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. A total of 344 395 tonnes of crab were imported, with the largest importers being the United States (97 336 tonnes or 28.3 percent of the total); China (90 122 tonnes or 26.2 percent of the total); and the Republic of Korea (37 501 tonnes or 10.9 percent of the total). China had the strongest growth (+32 percent), while the United States only had a 3.3 percent increase compared to the same period in 2022.

Chinese imports of Russian king crab and snow crab have multiplied over the past year. During the first nine months of 2023, China imported 20 614 tonnes of live crab worth USD 678.7 million from the Russian Federation. This represented an increase of 60.7 percent in volume and 39.5 percent in value, respectively, compared to the same period in 2022. However, prices in 2023 were down by 20 percent compared to 2022, one reason being that the Russian exporters experienced competition from North American suppliers increasingly targeting the Chinese market. Nevertheless, imports of Russian king crab into China are expected to increase considerably in 2024.

In a fairly new development, Russian crab exporters have begun to ship live king crab to China by air. In October 2023, the first shipment of some eight tonnes of live Russian king crab were flown from Moscow to Qingdao. Some of the crab was sent on to Beijing and Shanghai.

Russian crab producers remain unable to ship product to Western countries due to their ban on imports of seafood from the Russian Federation.

Last year (2023) was good for the Norwegian crab industry. During the year, Norway exported 2 450 tonnes of king crab with an FOB value of NOK 1.2 billion (USD 116 million) and 5 026 tonnes of snow crab with an FOB value of NOK 510 million (USD 50 million). By volume, this represented a growth of 56 percent for king crab and 33 percent for snow crab. The largest markets were the United States, China (Hong Kong SAR), Viet Nam and the European Union.

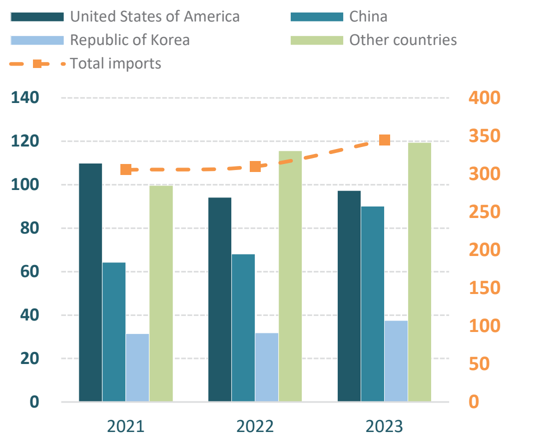
Outlook

Supplies of king crab will be limited in 2024, and prices are bound to rise. For snow crab, the supply situation will be somewhat better, with increases in the Barents Sea, but lower catches in the Bering Sea. Landings in Eastern Canada should be good.

Demand for crab is on the way up in China, and there are signs that the country will soon dominate the market totally. Western suppliers are pushing product to China as the European market is relatively weak. The US market is under-supplied from domestic production and is now importing more from Norway and Canada.

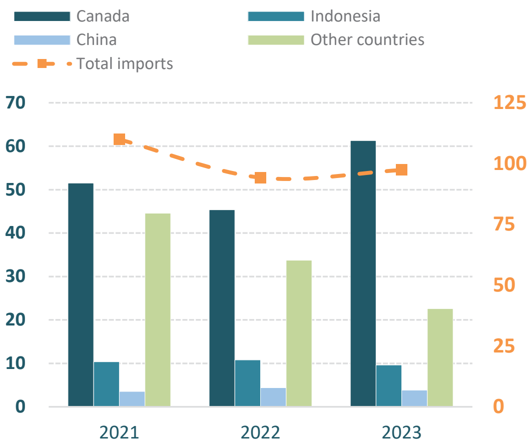
Price developments will be mixed. Prices for king crab are expected to go up, while snow crab prices may be somewhat softer.

World | Imports | Crab
Top three importers of crabs
Unit: 1 000 tonnes, January–September



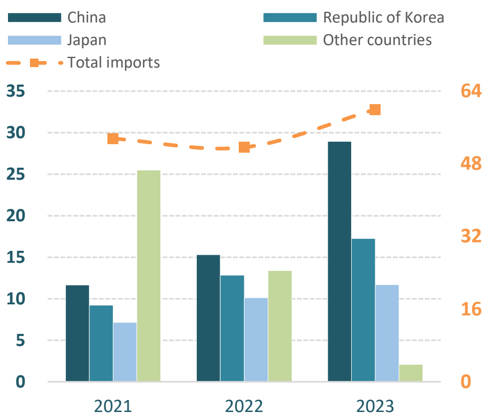
Source: Author's own elaboration based on GTT. 2024. Global Trade Tracker. [Cited 5 January 2024]. www.globaltradetracker.com

USA | Imports | Crab
Top three origins
Unit: 1 000 tonnes, January–September



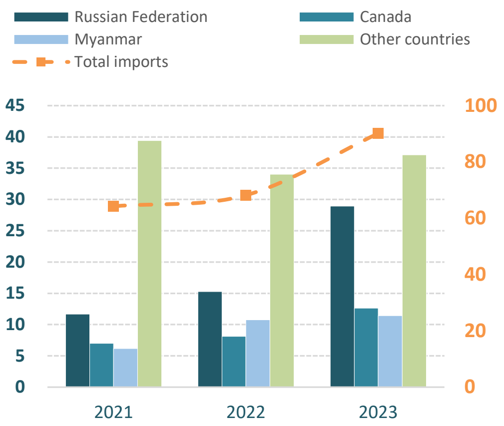
Source: Author's own elaboration based on GTT. 2024. Global Trade Tracker. [Cited 5 January 2024]. www.globaltradetracker.com

Russian Federation | Exports | Crab
Top three destinations
Unit: 1 000 tonnes, January–September



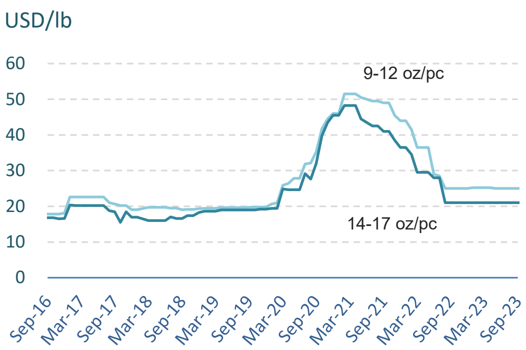
Source: Author's own elaboration based on GTT. 2024. Global Trade Tracker. [Cited 5 January 2024]. www.globaltradetracker.com

China | Imports | Crab
Top three origins
Unit: 1 000 tonnes, January–September



Source: Author's own elaboration based on GTT. 2024. Global Trade Tracker. [Cited 5 January 2024]. www.globaltradetracker.com

Prices
Crab: USA, Japan



Claw and sections, red, EXW New York

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the INFOFISH Trade News. 2023. INFOFISH. [Cited 5 January 2024]. www.infofish.org

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