

# Fish or Flight:

## The Impact of Transferable Access Rights on Rural Alaskan Salmon Harvesters

Jennifer Meredith

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Economics, University of Washington

Version: November 2017

### Abstract

This paper explores how salmon harvesters in rural Alaska responded to the implementation of a limited access management regime that introduced transferable permits in 1975. In the context of a predominantly subsistence economy, the lump-sum payments from salmon permit sales were an important source of potential liquidity. Using household survey data collected in nine remote Alaskan villages, I estimate the impact of permit sale on the initial permitholders and their descendants. The eligibility rules used to allocate permits allow for the construction of control groups from applicants given non-transferable permits and younger siblings of original permitholders. Sale of the permit by original permitholders makes their descendants more likely to migrate out of the original village and less likely to participate in commercial or subsistence harvest. Other impacts depend on the type of permit and the gender of the initial permitholder. Higher value drift net permits were primarily allocated to men whereas set net permits are a smaller asset that were traditionally fished by women and children. Drift net permit sales were leveraged into an immediate increase in the probability of outmigration but no long run improvements in descendant outcomes. Contrary to the intentions of the permit system, set net permit sales diminish the assets and formal employment of the original permitholder, and make their descendants more likely to be formally employed outside the village. The results suggest that a transition to rights-based management of natural resources will have unintended distributional consequences that undermine the sustainability of rural fishing operations. The magnitude of these effects depends on liquidity, gender norms, and labor market frictions.