



NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service

Alaska Region

NEWS ALERT

P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

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NOAA: More actions needed to help western Steller sea lion recover

Juneau, AK – NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service says fishery modifications are needed in the Aleutian Islands to further promote the recovery of the western population of Steller sea lions, and to be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

That's the conclusion of the [draft 2010 Groundfish Biological Opinion](#), released today by the Alaska Region of NOAA Fisheries. The document addresses possible effects of current management practices for groundfish fisheries in the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska on endangered species, including North Pacific humpback and sperm whales and the western population of Steller sea lions. Fishers harvest more than 4 billion pounds of fish from the area each year.

Although scientists found that current fishing practices are unlikely to impact the endangered whale populations, such is not the case with Steller sea lions. The greatest concern is in fishery management area 543, in the western Aleutians. From 2000-2008, adult numbers declined 45% in this sub-region. Pup production declined 43%, making the ratio of pups to adult females on rookeries in this sub-region the lowest in the entire western Steller sea lion population. This continued low birth rate is an indicator of nutritional stress, or lack of food.

"We need to mitigate the potential for competition for food in areas where sea lion numbers are declining," said Jim Balsiger, regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries, Alaska Region.

A definitive cause for the decline of sea lions has not been identified, and it is likely that other factors are important in understanding the lack of recovery, Balsiger said. "Even though factors other than fishing also affect the sea lion population, under the Endangered Species Act we are required to ensure that the actions our agency takes to authorize fisheries do not jeopardize these endangered animals."

NOAA Fisheries has included a Reasonable and Prudent Alternative (RPA) in the draft biological opinion that would modify groundfish management in the Aleutian Islands to limit competition between commercial fishing for groundfish and the sea lions. The RPA provides a proposed approach to avoid jeopardizing the western population of Steller sea lions and impacts to designated critical habitat (0-20 nautical miles from rookeries and haulouts). Because Atka mackerel and Pacific cod are the two most prominent species in the Steller sea lion diet in this region, the alternative calls for the closure of the Atka mackerel and Pacific cod fisheries in area 543. Additional but less restrictive measures are also needed in adjacent areas 541 and 542 in the central Aleutians, where sea lions continue to decline as well, albeit at a much slower rate than in area 543.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council and the public will review the draft biological opinion at a special meeting in Anchorage August 16-20.

“NOAA Fisheries will work with the Council to develop management measures for the groundfish fisheries to ensure fishing operations are consistent with the mandates of the ESA,” said Balsiger. “The ultimate goal is the recovery of the western Steller sea lion population so that the species can be removed from the list of endangered and threatened wildlife.”

The draft biological opinion is available at:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/stellers/esa/biop/draft/0810.htm>. A final biological opinion is expected in January 2011. The new fishery management measures are expected to be implemented in January 2011.

NOAA Fisheries is accepting public comment on the draft Biological Opinion until 5 p.m. ADT on August 27. Comments should be submitted to: Jim Balsiger, Regional Administrator, Alaska Region, NMFS, Attn: Ellen Sebastian. Comments may be mailed to: P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802; sent by fax to: (907) 586-7557; emailed to: fmabiop@noaa.gov; or hand delivered to the Juneau Federal Building: 709 West 9th Street, Room 420A, Juneau, AK

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-30-

Summary of RPA for recovery of western Steller sea lion

Area 543, Western Aleutians

- Atka mackerel—fishery closure year-round;
- Pacific cod—fishery closure year-round;
- Pollock—no changes.

Area 542, Central Aleutians

- All Groundfish (includes pollock)—fishery closure year-round, 0-3 nautical miles from the Kanaga Island rookery, one of the few locations where reproduction is occurring.
- Atka mackerel
 - Fishery closure year-round, 0-20 nautical miles of critical habitat zone;
 - Limit total allowable catch to no more than 47% of allowable biological catch;
 - Modify Season A: Jan 20-June 10
 - Allow fishing in the B Season: June 10-Nov. 1
- Pacific cod
 - Fishery closure Nov. 1-Dec. 31;
 - Fishery closure year-round, 0-10 nm of critical habitat zone;
 - Fishery closure year-round, 10-20 nm of critical habitat zone for vessels using trawl gear;
 - Fishery closure Jan. 1-June 10 for, 10-20 nm of critical habitat zone for vessels using non-trawl gear
- Pollock—no changes other than closure 0-3 nm from Kanaga Island fishery.

Area 541, Central Aleutians

- Atka mackerel
 - Current fishery closure year-round, 0-20 nm of critical habitat zone stays in effect;
 - Modify Season A: Jan 20-June 10
 - Modify Season B: June 10-Nov. 1
- Pacific cod
 - Fishery closure Nov. 1-Dec. 31;
 - Fishery closure year-round, 0-10 nm of critical habitat zone;
 - Fishery closure Jan.1-June 10, 10-20 nm of critical habitat zone for vessels using non-trawl gear
 - Fishery closure June 10-Nov. 1, 10-20 nm of critical habitat zone for vessels using trawl gear.
- Pollock—no changes

