

Jim Ayers Concept Discussion Comments
April 4th Ecosystem Committee
Agenda item: Groundfish PEIS Planning

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires a federal agency to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) when it is authorizing a major federal action having a significant impact on the human environment. The EIS must evaluate the potential impacts, including cumulative impacts, of the proposed action and alternatives to it. Since statehood it has been understood that commercial fishing in the Alaska EEZ has major implications for Alaska. And, it is now understood by the Council, fishing industry, Tribes, and all other affected Alaskans that authorization of fisheries in the Alaska EEZ are a major federal action requiring full compliance with NEPA, including necessary EISs.

The current management approaches and actions of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) are inadvertently becoming unjust. The current fisheries management approaches were developed within a general nebulous “framework” constructed in a different environment years ago. These actions are being conducted without full consideration of the interrelationship of fisheries economic actions, the society, and the environment in which they are conducted. The economy is a sub-set of our society, which as we know is embedded in our environment; and we all share in this same environment. The commercial fisheries is a major economic activity within our society, functioning in and effecting our shared environment. History and experience tells us such economic activities can have grave unintended impacts on others sharing within that environment. In our case cascading effects of management actions fall on others like Alaska Native families and those dependent on the marine life and healthy ecosystems within the same environment. We need guiding principles to manage commercial fisheries in a Just and sustainable manner in the world and environment in which we now live.

The world and conditions of the environment on which the current Programmatic Supplemental EIS was built have dramatically changed. When the current PEIS framework was developed, there were 6 billion people and no recognition or consideration of the impacts of climate change, let alone possible cumulative and compounding impacts of climate change and industrial activities. We are now in a world of over 8 billion people; rapid climate changes; ever growing demand for resources. Clearly the current PEIS is no longer adequate or compliant. Recently, over 200 countries met in Panama to discuss the climate crisis. The gathering had one primary guiding principle: “we cannot solve the climate crisis without addressing the ocean.”

Nowhere is this imperative more important than Alaska. In Alaska, there is a binding interconnectedness among ocean ecosystems, fisheries, upland ecosystems, Western Alaska Native families, and other Alaska families. Climate change is having horrific impacts throughout these ecosystems; and we now know commercial fisheries can have exacerbating effects. We are responsible for Just stewardship so as to provide healthy biodiverse ecosystems with sustainable fisheries for this and future generations. The PEIS is the road map of our stewardship.

The need is clear. As the Council and agency consider needed updates to NEPA compliance, we must acknowledge a difficult reality: the marine environment is undergoing alarming significant changes rapidly and unpredictably with serious impacts on the ecosystem, the fisheries and Alaska families

living within the ecosystem. The need for improved analysis and management has been accounted numerous times over the past few years by tribes, communities, fishermen, NGO's, as well as scientific journals. (See attachment: "Significant Changes in the Bering Sea"). The current PEIS framework approach and existing system of management is ill-equipped to address these changes. Further, the current management system was not designed to incorporate Indigenous Knowledge and community perspectives needed to ensure considerations and mitigation of fisheries impact. The Council and agency, with participation from tribes, impacted communities, and members of the public, must take steps to address these omissions, impacts and related problems.

The Purpose of a new analysis and new alternatives is to restore, maintain and protect the health and biodiversity of the ecosystem for this and future generations. Management principles must provide for a more wholistic approach considering maintaining healthy populations of non-target species including Salmon, Crab, Halibut, Fur Seals and other species (avoiding causing collateral mortality threatening reproduction); restoring and maintaining opportunities for Western Alaska Native families' subsistence; fisheries opportunities for other Alaska families who rely on the marine ecosystem for their wellbeing; as well as continued opportunities for vibrant personal, sport and sustainable commercial fisheries. We are the stewards responsible for just, sustainable, truly ecosystem-based fisheries management. This requires a clear definition and understanding that "sustainable" includes subsistence and non-target species and important ecological areas. The NEPA process can provide for evaluation of new approaches and a basis of information from which to make informed choices about future direction.

Alternatives must begin with acknowledging current alternatives are insufficient. We must construct new Alternatives with goals and objectives to strengthen resilience, recognize and respect the interrelationship of economic activity, the people and environment. These alternatives should promote additional principles of recognition, care and respect of other's needs within the environment. To ensure Justice we must get beyond fear of conservation. Scientists and International leaders across the world are urging precautionary actions. This reality demands the analysis and scoping to examine new tools, rules, goals, and measurable objectives. This much needed NEPA approach can be accomplished only if it is undertaken in good faith and with openness to new methods and new information including traditional knowledge. The current revision approach considering only the outdated 2004 "current ground fish management policy" and associated goals and objectives can unnecessarily and perhaps illegally restrict needed creativity to meet the challenges of today's realities.

The Council has been lauded for many decades as a leader in ecosystem-based, sustainable management. This NEPA process provides the opportunity to reassert that position. The Council could take advantage of this opportunity by showing a willingness to meet the challenges presented by climate change, make a concerted effort to broaden the knowledge base and include other ways of knowing, and consider all options for improving management. A NEPA document does not force action; and so this is an ideal chance to shed business-as-usual approach of winners and losers and consider new ways of approaching fisheries management in this new world.