



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
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18 September 2020

David Witherell
Executive Director
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
1007 West Third, Suite 400
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Mr. Witherell,

Thank you for your letter of July 14, 2020, regarding Alaska's federal groundfish surveys in 2020 and 2021. The subsequent conversations with North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) staff and the Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) have led to a good plan for communicating survey priorities in 2021. I appreciate your understanding that plans will need to be flexible given the uncertainty of these times. With that understanding I can commit to giving updates about 2021 survey planning at both the October and December 2020 Council meetings.

The Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) shares your concern about the cancellation of five of six large scale research surveys in federal waters off Alaska in 2020. This was a difficult decision for the agency as we strive to meet our core mission responsibilities while balancing the realities and impacts of the current health crisis.

The AFSC has a dedicated survey staff who are committed to helping us fulfill our research mission. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have engaged in careful planning and rigorous analysis of various options for conducting surveys this year and next. As a result, we were able to complete some important research and processes studies in 2020. Through these less logistically challenging or smaller-scale survey efforts with research partners, we were able to effectively develop and implement new safety protocols and practices, modelled after successful industry methods, which may better position us for 2021 to implement our complement of larger-scale surveys.

The efforts we were able to complete this year include: Gulf of Alaska longline survey, western Gulf of Alaska cod nearshore surveys, southeast Alaska salmon and ecosystem surveys, crab tagging studies in Bristol Bay, cod tagging studies in the northern Bering Sea, active mooring retrievals on the U.S. EEZ border with the Russian Federation, and passive acoustic moorings in the Bering Sea and Chukchi Sea. Where possible, the AFSC collaborated with NOAA's Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory to redeploy sensors in the Bering Sea so that we wouldn't lose the ability to collect environmental intelligence during the first half of 2021. We were also able to mitigate losses from canceled midwater assessment surveys with an uncrewed saildrone survey of the core pollock region in the Bering Sea. Research and development accomplished by the AFSC in recent years made it feasible to use this new technology for the assessment. Additionally, keenly aware of the consequences of not conducting other core surveys in 2020, our stock assessment scientists have worked tirelessly to provide the fall 2020 Council management process with thorough and innovative options for addressing uncertainty associated with gaps in empirical data availability.

Our planning for 2021 surveys will continue to be refined as new information becomes available and the pandemic response evolves through at least the next year. Until the COVID-19 pandemic is under control, AFSC field operations will continue to require an unprecedented level of consideration to ensure the health and safety of NOAA Fisheries employees, charter vessel employees, and communities where activities will take place. NOAA Fisheries, in collaboration with the NOAA Office of Marine and Aviation Operations, will continue to refine protocols for operating safely in 2021.

Currently, planning and funding for the 2021 field season include the core survey regions in the Gulf of Alaska, eastern Bering Sea, and northern Bering Sea. The newly appropriated funding received in FY20 will be used to partially support 2021 surveys as originally planned. We continue to work out the details associated with the survey duration, station density and complete areas to be covered by surveys within each region. The recommendations from the August 28, 2020, SSC subcommittee meeting will inform those decisions. At the October and December Council meetings I will present the current plan for each of the 2021 AFSC surveys. In February 2021, once we have a more clear understanding of FY2021 budget and how it will impact both the 2021 and 2022 surveys, I will give the usual “State of the Center” presentation.

We appreciate the Council’s commitment to a continued dialogue with the AFSC regarding its science mission. The importance of having a balanced and diverse science portfolio that supports the existing survey time series, stock assessment advances, knowledge gained from process studies, and innovative research tools aligned to meet the demands of ecosystem-based fisheries management cannot be overstated. These ongoing research activities are helping us mitigate the unexpected data gaps in 2020. They will continue to be vital for helping resource managers and the fishing industry achieve optimum sustainable yield and adapt to the dramatic environmental changes that are occurring in Alaska.

AFSC is committed to maintaining survey data collections as our top science priority to manage Alaska fisheries in the short term and to sustain fisheries, protected resources, and marine ecosystems in the long term. I look forward to working with you to achieve these goals and to discussing research planning and priorities for 2021.

Sincerely,



Robert Foy
Science Director