

Minutes of the First Meeting of the Alaska Steller Sea Lion Restoration Team, November 20, 2000

Background

In a Press Release dated September 11, 2000, Governor Knowles announced the formation of a state Sea Lion Restoration Team of *“scientists and stakeholders to develop an alternative management strategy for protecting the Steller sea lions that allows sustainable fishing to continue.”* He outlined three elements of their mission: *“First, work to restore healthy, sustainable populations of Steller sea lions so they can be removed from the federal threatened species list; second, promote scientific research into the cause of sea lion population declines; and third, employ the principle of adaptive management.”*

Participants

The initial meeting of the Alaska Steller Sea Lion Restoration Team (ASSLRT) was held in Anchorage on November 20, 2000. All members of team were present and included: C. Morgen Crow – a representative (executive director) of the CDQ group, Coastal Villages Region Fund, Jay Stinson – a trawl fisherman from Kodiak, Michelle Ridgway – a marine ecological consultant and board member of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, Kate Wynne – a marine mammal biologist with the University of Alaska Sea Grant Program, Gordon Kruse (chair) – a marine fishery scientist with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), Bob Small – the marine mammals coordinator with ADF&G, Ken Pitcher – a marine mammal biologist with ADF&G, Lorrie Rea – a marine mammal biologist with ADF&G, Denby Lloyd – the westward regional supervisor with ADF&G, and Earl Krygier – the extended jurisdiction coordinator with ADF&G. Denby Lloyd chaired the first half of the meeting, and then passed the chair to Gordon Kruse.

Deliberations

Denby Lloyd chaired the morning session. A draft agenda was approved. For most of the morning, the team discussed the purpose and scope of the team’s charge. They reviewed the team’s knowledge of the issues surrounding the decline of Steller Sea Lions (SSL). The team discussed the possibility that nutritional limitation was responsible for the original decline through the 1980s, whereas other cumulative factors may have had increased influence on more recent population trends. The team discussed a predator pit hypothesis, junk food hypothesis, localized depletion, effects of vessel noise, entanglement, subsistence harvest, disease, pollutants, and other factors. The team discussed the idea that reduced juvenile survival in the western population was the major demographic factor responsible for the decline rather than decreased reproduction. Discussions included evidence for reduced SSL growth in the 1980s versus 1970s and contrasting research findings among SSL in Southeast Alaska (SE) versus the central and western Gulf of Alaska. The team discussed current priority research on nutritional

stress, and some potential needed areas of research were briefly discussed, such as the need to continue independent DNA studies for use in stock assessment and stock separation, nutritional limitation, and population dynamics and ecological studies.

Other questions raised by the team included: Do relationships exist between changes in SSL, forage fishes (capelin, herring, etc.), and species like pollock and cod? Have relative densities of fish and SSL changed, both pre and post-recent decline, and between the SE and Western Alaska stocks of SSL? Do we have any knowledge about how fish schools disperse under various fishing pressure and/or gear types or in response to vessel noise? What are the impacts of particular management schemes, and what are the ramifications of concentrated effort in state waters if fishing in federal waters is substantially restricted?

In the afternoon session, Denby passed the chair to Gordon Kruse. The team focused on the following activities: (1) drafting a ASSLRT mission statement; (2) developing a list of team activities; (3) planning a schedule for providing prompt review and comment to the ADF&G Commissioner on the BiOp; (4) preparing a list of documents for consideration by the team in advance of the next meeting; (5) identifying primary topics for the next meeting; and (6) scheduling of the next meeting.

The team drafted the following mission statement:

"The purpose of the Alaska Steller Sea Lion Restoration Team is to promote the recovery of SSL populations while sustaining viable commercial fisheries in Alaska. Specifically, we will (1) review the justification of fishery restrictions to protect and restore SSL, and (2) recommend research priorities and adaptive management strategies designed to identify those factors inhibiting the recovery of the endangered western stock of SSL and provide increased understanding of fishery and SSL interactions."

The team developed a list of future action items:

- Prepare a concise synopsis of SSL declines, including a chronology of potential causes/correlates during the earlier and most recent phases of the declines
- Review the soon-to-be-released NMFS Biological Opinion (BiOp) on SSL and fisheries, as well as associated recommendations by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC)
- Prepare an overview of ongoing research on SSL and associated fisheries interactions and unpublished findings from new research activities, especially imminent research that may not appear in the BiOp
- Identify and recommend new research priorities on SSL and fisheries interactions that are needed to evaluate the SSL issue and consider the funding levels associated with SSL-related research
- Identify potential opportunities for acquiring more comprehensive data sets on research needs via fishers, subsistence hunters, U.S. Coast Guard and others
- Develop management recommendations, primarily experimental and adaptive, for

- federal (NPFMC) and state (Board of Fisheries, BOF) consideration
- Review current definitions of SSL Critical Habitat (CH) including the history of development, data used for the determinations, and what is considered “critical” to SSL
- Review the SSL endangered and threatened species determinations within the context of the ESA and within the prospects of changes in carrying capacity

The team identified the following tasks to be of highest priority:

- 1) Review NMFS’ 11/30 BiOp and recent Council actions (all team members) – this would be the highest priority, and will be a major topic of the second ASSLRT meeting;
- 2) Review SSL CH definitions and designations. The team discussed that it will be necessary to review CH in conjunction with the BiOp review;
- 3) Draft a written synopsis of the decline and chronology of potential causes/correlates – to be prepared in advance of the second ASSLRT meeting (Ken);
- 4) Prepare a brief review of imminent research findings and current research that ADF&G, NMFS, the Marine Mammal Consortium, and Sea Life Center and others are working on or “in press” – to be prepared near the time of the second ASSLRT meeting (SSL – Ken and fish studies – Gordon); and
- 5) Subsequent priorities will be to recommend (1) future research priorities, and (2) potential experimental or adaptive management approaches.

The team developed a list of reference documents for consideration in future deliberations and identified a team member (in parentheses) who will make the documents available:

- Endangered Species Act (Gordon)
- State of Alaska fisheries summary report (Gordon)
- Final (1992) Recovery Plan for SSL (Ken provided)
- Panel recommendations from an experimental design workshop on testing the efficacy of SSL no-trawl fishery exclusion zones in Alaska (1998) (Lorrie provided)
- NMFS 11/30 BiOp (Pending, Gordon or Earl will make available)
- Experimental Management Advice (Bob)
- Wallace’s (1999) review of the SSL Recovery Program (Earl provided)
- GOA and BS/AI Groundfish FMP Summaries (Michelle; also available at NPFMC website: <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/>)
- Summary of the RFRPAs (1998) (NMFS website under reconstruction; new location to be provided soon)
- Ecosystem Chapter of the Council’s 2000 SAFE (Michelle; also available at NPFMC website: <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/>)
- Federal register – proposed and final rule of SSL critical habitats including rookeries, important haulouts, and critical foraging areas (Kate)

The team scheduled the next ASSLRT meeting for December 15 in Anchorage, where the team will focus on the BiOp and a review of SSL CH. In advance of the meeting, a synopsis of the SSL decline and associated factors will be prepared by Ken. Around the time of the meeting, Ken and Gordon will prepare a brief summary of ongoing research on SSL and fishery interactions. Team members are advised to purchase their tickets early (preferably non-refundable tickets if they are committed to attending) to help stretch the travel budget. Both Earl Krygier and Bob Small will be unavailable to participate in the next meeting. Jeff Hartman will be requested to participate in Earl's stead to recap recent NPFMC actions on SSL issues.

Post-meeting Note from the Chair

Meetings of the Alaska Steller Sea Lion Restoration Team are work sessions. All meeting minutes will be distributed to the public upon request, and comments are welcomed. In conjunction with routine NPFMC meetings, the state also convenes a Stakeholders Meeting as a primary venue to seek public dialogue on sea lion issues. Michelle Ridgway, Jay Stinson, and Earl Krygier participate on both the Stakeholder Panel and ASSLRT. In their dual capacities, they will distribute ASSLRT minutes to the Stakeholder Panel, and in turn they will disseminate Stakeholder Panel minutes and stakeholder input to ASSLRT.