



NOAA FISHERIES

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NOAA Fisheries will Cancel Five Alaska Research Surveys for 2020

Due to the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unique challenges those are creating for the agency, NOAA Fisheries today took the unprecedented step to cancel five of six large scale research surveys in federal waters off Alaska in 2020. The cancelled surveys include the Aleutian Islands bottom trawl survey, the eastern Bering Sea bottom trawl survey, the northern Bering Sea bottom trawl survey, the Bering Sea pollock acoustics survey, and the Fall Ecosystem Survey. The annual Alaska Longline Survey will take place as planned.

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. Over the past two months, we have been engaged in careful planning and rigorous analysis of various options for conducting surveys this year. After much deliberation, we determined that there is no way to move forward with a survey plan that effectively minimizes risks to staff, crew, and the communities associated with the surveys.

Specifically, conducting the key groundfish and crab surveys in a limited timeframe would require extraordinarily long surveys, well beyond standard survey operations. Extended quarantines for the survey team prior to and following surveys would also be necessary to ensure survey team and public health and safety.

While the cancelled surveys are the primary fishery independent sources of data for management of critical fishery stocks in the Alaska Region, we are fortunate to be working in a robust management system with a long time series of fisheries and ecosystem data and stock assessment models which helps ensure there is limited conservation impact from the loss of survey data this year. We are also working to mitigate the loss of one year of survey data by:

- Collecting some acoustic data using unmanned surface vehicles to support the pollock assessment; and
- Working with federal, state and industry partners to collect other fisheries, oceanographic, and ecosystem data, and
- Through the collection of fisheries observer data.

This information will be presented to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council Scientific and Statistical Committee Meeting on June 1 and full council on June 8, and NOAA Fisheries and the Council will work through its processes to determine a path forward.

NOAA Fisheries is continuing to reassess the status of other surveys and working through numerous survey scenarios relative to community pandemic safeguards and safe work practices, so that we maximize the science available for fisheries management in this challenging year.