



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Anchorage Fish & Wildlife Field Office
605 West 4th Avenue, Room G-61
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2249



In reply, refer to:
AFWFO

Agenda Item B-6: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report
October 6, 2010

Northern Sea Otter

In April 2010, the southwest Alaska sea otter recovery team submitted the draft recovery plan to the Service. The draft plan has been reviewed by the Service, and a notice announcing the availability of the plan for public review and comment has been cleared for publication in the Federal Register. The public comment period will be 120 days.

Pacific Walrus

The USFWS, Marine Mammals Management Walrus Program is in the process of making an ESA listing decision and drafting a Federal Register notice. The original publication date for the Federal register notice was 10 September 2010, however, we sought an extension to incorporate the results of two recently completed USGS reports into our decision. The extension was granted and the new due date is 31 January 2011. The reports concern modeling studies of Bering and Chukchi Sea ice dynamics and predicted walrus response to changes in ice cover and other stressors. Both studies modeled outcomes to the end of the 21st century.

Associated with the complete or near complete melt of sea ice in the Chukchi Sea this summer, several thousand walrus came to shore at Pt. Lay in September. This haulout attracted a lot of media attention, with stories in several newspapers, and segments on the TODAY Show, NBC Nightly News, and local television stations. Estimated numbers of walrus range from 5,000-20,000+. Through the efforts of the residents of Pt. Lay, and others, disturbance to the animals has been kept to a minimum. Based on past experience, we expect the animals to begin to disperse and head toward the Russian coast within the next few weeks.

Short-tailed Albatross

A 12-year cold streak came to an end this summer. With no short-tailed albatross reported coming up on longline gear since 1998, two were reported taken in the Bering Sea in the past several weeks. A 7.8-year old short-tailed albatross was taken on August 27th in area 523 by a cod freezer longliner making a set in the dark. The observer did not check that set for deployment of streamer lines, but the vessel had them deployed on all previously checked sets, and has been a good performer in terms of avoiding seabird bycatch from 2004-2007. A 3.8-year old short-tailed albatross was taken on September 14th by a cod freezer longliner in area 521 using both paired streamer lines and integrated weight lines during a set made in the afternoon. This vessel was an average performer in terms of seabird bycatch from 2004-2007.

New FWS Representation on the Council

Denny Lassuy from the USFWS Fisheries and Ecological Services Program will be replacing Greg Balogh as Geoff Haskett's alternate on the NPFMC. Don Rivard, USFWS Office of Subsistence Management, remains on board to fill in for Dr. Lassuy as needed.



IN REPLY REFER TO:

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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OCT 05 2010



Eric Olson, Chairman
North Pacific Fisheries Management Council
605 W. 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2252

Re: Support for Restructuring the North Pacific Groundfish Observer Program

Dear Mr. Olson:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) wishes to express our full support for the proposal to restructure the Groundfish Observer Program in the North Pacific. The proposed Groundfish Observer Program restructuring seeks to expand observer coverage to include vessels that are less than 60 feet long in the groundfish sector and all vessels in the commercial Pacific halibut fleet. The current Groundfish Observer Program regulations established in 1990 require observer coverage on groundfish vessels that are greater than 60 feet in length, and have limited coverage of the Pacific halibut sector. While the current level of effort is commendable, there are significant gaps in observer coverage among certain sectors of economically important commercial fisheries in Alaska.

The Groundfish Observer Program is responsible for gathering essential data and reporting those data to resource managers. In addition to critical target and bycatch information for the demersal longline, trawl, and pot fishing vessels and processors, observers collect data relevant to the conservation of marine resources. Of particular concern to the FWS are the data collected on seabird mortalities that occur incidental to fishing operations in the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska. Thousands to tens of thousands of seabirds are known to have been killed in a single year when they grab bait on lines from vessels fishing in Alaska's demersal groundfish longline fishery (Dietrich and Fitzgerald 2010). Additionally, seabirds are known to strike the 3rd wire during trawl fishing operations, however enumerating the amount of mortality has proven difficult (Melvin et al. 2010).

Over the years, our concern about the threat of commercial hook and line fishing on the endangered short-tailed albatross has resulted in outstanding responses by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), and the North Pacific Longline Association, among others. Seabird bycatch in the groundfish fishery has been drastically reduced due to the use of seabird deterrent devices and monitoring through the Groundfish Observer Program. When properly deployed and regularly used, seabird deterrent devices, especially paired streamer lines, can be close to 100% effective (Melvin et al. 2001).

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However, seabird mortalities continue to occur due to interactions with longlines. Until observer coverage spans all sectors and all sizes of vessels, there will remain significant uncertainty regarding the causes of seabird bycatch in commercial fishing operations. Observers perform spot-checks on the use and proper deployment of streamer lines on hook and line vessels, providing managers with critical data that allow assessment of the effectiveness of our mitigation tools (DeMaster 2010).

After 12 years without an observed take of short-tailed albatross, two were caught and killed in the demersal longline fishery within the past 2 months. As testimony to the vital importance of the Groundfish Observer Program, both short-tailed albatross carcasses came aboard during the normal course of observer sampling, and the takes were instantly reported to the NMFS. Despite these mortalities, we remain confident that with the use of seabird deterrents in the groundfish hook and line fishery and the careful monitoring program provided through the Groundfish Observer Program, resource managers have the ability to measure and control the impact of commercial fishing operations on short-tailed albatross. However, without monitoring across all fishing fleets, our ability to measure and control impacts on these endangered birds is incomplete.

In closing, I would like to reiterate our strong support for restructuring of the Groundfish Observer Program to increase observer coverage to commercial Pacific halibut vessels and groundfish vessels less than 60 feet in length.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important topic. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our comments further, please contact Ellen Lance from the Endangered Species Branch of the Anchorage Fish and Wildlife Field Office at (907) 271-1467.

Sincerely,


Regional Director

Literature Cited

- Dietrich KS, Fitzgerald SM. 2010. Analysis of 2004-2007 vessel-specific seabird bycatch data in Alaska demersal longline fisheries. AFSC Processed Rep. 2010-04, 52 p. Alaska Fish. Sci. Cent., NOAA, Natl. Mar. Fish. Serv., 7600 Sand Point Way NE, Seattle WA 98115.
- DeMaster DP. 2010. Use of seabird avoidance measures on observed groundfish longline vessels during 2007 and 2008. Unpublished Memo, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, Seattle, Washington. 2pp.
- Melvin EF, Dietrich KS, Fitzgerald S, Cardoso T. 2010. Reducing seabird strikes with trawl cables in the pollock catcher-processor fleet in the eastern Bering Sea. Polar Biology. DOI 10.1007/s00300-010-0873-1.
- Melvin EF, Parrish JK, Dietrich KS, Hamel OS. 2001. Solutions to seabird bycatch in Alaska's demersal longline fisheries. Project A/FP-7. Washington Sea Grant College Program. WSG-AS 01-0

cc: James W. Balsiger, Regional Administrator, NMFS