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United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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FWS/AFES

Report # B-6: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, October 2017.

The following information is a summary of the major updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that the Service is involved in relation to the affairs of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council).

I. Marine Mammal Management

As part of a legal settlement agreement, the Service must decide whether to add Pacific walruses to the Endangered Species list by September 30, 2017. Pacific walruses have been considered a candidate for listing since 2011. Once the final decision is publicly available, the Service will reach out to interested parties and be available to answer any questions including those of the Council at the December meeting.

For further information, contact Patrick Lemons, Marine Mammals Management Program Chief, at patrick_lemons@fws.gov (907-786-3668).

II. Migratory Bird Management

Update on Seabird Mortality Events and Monitoring

Higher than normal dead and dying seabirds have been reported from Shishmaref south to the Pribilof Islands, with highest onshore counts recorded from coasts near Nome, Alaska. This is a food safety concern to coastal communities as well as an indicator of possible changes in ocean conditions. Nearly 800 beached seabird carcasses have been counted since early August 2017. Some of the bird carcasses are currently being evaluated at the U.S. Geological Survey National Wildlife Health Center. Evaluated birds have been severely emaciated, similar to the common murre that died in the Gulf of Alaska in 2015-2016. Most of the dead birds in this year's mortality event have been northern fulmars and short-tailed shearwaters (which are abundant in the region this time of year), but a wide range of species have been affected. Dead or lethargic seabirds included crested auklets, black-legged kittiwakes, murrelets, gulls, tufted and horned puffins, and other species including species that eat primarily zooplankton to those that eat

primarily fish. To date there is no microscopic or laboratory culture evidence of infectious disease. While examined birds ultimately died of starvation, underlying factors (disease, toxins, or simple lack of food) have yet to be identified, or ruled out. Testing of carcass tissues is ongoing and results will be shared as available. There have been multiple vessel-based research projects in the region throughout summer and fall, and data on marine conditions and presence of algal blooms will be forthcoming. Ocean temperatures have been warm, which has been concurrent with seabird mortality events in the past. The Service posted a one-page information sheet on the current event, linked via our regional home page (<https://www.fws.gov/alaska/>) or accessed directly at:

https://www.fws.gov/alaska/pdf/BeringSea_DieOff_Info_Final%20Release_9Sep2017.pdf

For further information, contact Kathy Kuletz, Seabird Coordinator, at kathy_kuletz@fws.gov (907-786-3453) within the Division of Migratory Bird Management.

III. Aleutian and Bering Sea Islands Landscape Conservation Cooperative

Connecting Communities, Managers, and Researchers to Promote Resilience and Adaptation on Alaska's Coasts.

In 2016, three of the Service's Alaska based Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) joined the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, Alaska Sea Grant, the Alaska Ocean Observing System as well as several agencies, tribal organizations and tribes to host workshops about coastal change. These workshops engaged over 300 people from 52 tribes and 18 federal and state agencies in regional conversations about changes underway in marine and coastal environments and how managers, researchers and tribes can work together to better address them. An initial presentation on this work was shared with the Council in April of 2017. A statewide coalition interested in sharing ideas and resources to adapt to Alaska's changing climate has emerged since the April Council meeting. The website www.AdaptAlaska.org is being established as a resource to promote adaptation and as a place for communities, managers, and researchers to connect.

For further information on these two topics, contact Aaron Poe, Aleutian and Bering Sea Islands Landscape Conservation Cooperative Coordinator, at aaron_poe@fws.gov (907-786-3834).

IV. Office of Subsistence Management

Federal Subsistence Fisheries Management of Chinook Salmon

Most stocks of Alaskan Chinook Salmon have been in low or below average abundance in recent years, which has resulted in numerous fisheries restrictions and closures. This trend continued in 2017, including restrictions and closures of several Federally managed subsistence fisheries. In conjunction with Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) managers, Federal fisheries managers took the following actions:

Yukon River:

The 2017 forecast was for a run size from 140,000 to 195,000 Chinook Salmon, which is below average. Due to the below average run projection, there was no directed Chinook Salmon commercial fishing the entire season and nearly all directed subsistence harvest opportunity was restricted. For 2017, the US/Canada Yukon River Panel agreed to continue the interim management escapement goal (IMEG) of 42,500-55,000 Chinook Salmon to Canada. The preliminary estimated border passage for Canadian-origin Chinook salmon, based on cumulative passage at the Eagle sonar project and historical run timing, was approximately 73,000 Chinook Salmon, which is above the high end of the Canadian IMEG. The Pilot Station sonar estimate of almost 263,000 Chinook Salmon was the largest since 2005. Due to the run returning stronger than projected, restrictions on subsistence fishermen were eased later in the season. Post-season total run size reconstruction is expected to be available in late February.

Kuskokwim River:

The 2017 forecast was for a return between 132,000-222,000 Chinook Salmon, which is above the drainage-wide sustainable escapement goal (SEG) range of 65,000–120,000 Chinook Salmon. However, on average 70,000-80,000 Chinook Salmon are harvested by subsistence fisherman. A return at the lower end of the forecast would not allow a full subsistence fishery to occur and still meet escapement goals. Therefore, the Chinook Salmon fishery was restricted to Federally qualified subsistence users in all waters under Federal subsistence management jurisdiction (Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge) beginning June 12, 2017, and throughout the majority of the run. No Chinook Salmon directed fishery occurred prior to June 12th due to combination of ADF&G regulations and Emergency Orders closing fishing with gill nets beginning May 20, 2017, and transitioning upstream as needed. In-season monitoring projects indicated a run at the lower end of the forecasted range, so restrictions remained throughout the entire season. Federally qualified subsistence users had four Chinook Salmon directed harvest opportunities for a total of 42 hours of fishing with gear limited to 6" mesh or smaller gillnets. The fishery on Federal public waters reverted to state management on July 7, 2017. Escapement goals for systems with weirs were met in all cases for Chinook Salmon.

Karluk and Ayakulik Rivers:

The 2017 Chinook Salmon returns to the Karluk and Ayakulik rivers on Kodiak Island were below average, with only 2,600 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 3,000-7,000) counted at the Karluk River weir and 3,712 fish (Biological Escapement Goal 4,800-8,400) at the Ayakulik River weir. Additionally, the high water events at the Ayakulik washed out the weir, which prevented accurate escapement estimates for periods during the season. The 2017 Chinook Salmon escapements into both systems did not provide enough fish for both escapement and subsistence needs. In an effort to conserve Chinook Salmon, the Service issued a special action to prohibit the retention of Chinook Salmon on Federal public waters of the Karluk watershed and in Federal submerged waters of Shelikof Strait.

Situk River:

The 2017 forecast was for a run size of 500 large Chinook Salmon (Biological escapement goal 450-1,050), and a run of this size would likely miss the lower bound of the escapement goal

unless preseason restrictions were in place. The ADF&G issued a closure on sport fishing for Chinook Salmon on March 6, 2017. Similarly, the U.S. Forest Service did not issue any Federal subsistence fishing permits allowing the harvest of Chinook Salmon in 2017. The Situk River has a preliminary escapement estimate of 1,187 for 2017, indicating the restrictions likely allowed more fish to reach the spawning grounds this year.

Stikine River:

The 2017 Stikine River pre-season terminal area abundance forecast is 18,300 large (>30 inches total length) Chinook Salmon. According to provisions in the Pacific Salmon Treaty, the terminal area pre-season run estimate must be greater than 28,100 large Chinook Salmon to produce an allowable catch for either the U.S. or Canada when managing for the mid-point of the escapement goal range (21,000). Therefore, subsistence fishing for Chinook Salmon in the Stikine River was restricted for the entire season beginning in early May. Post-season total escapement estimates are expected to be available at a later date.

For further information, contact George Pappas, Office of Subsistence Management State Subsistence Liaison, at George_Pappas@fws.gov (907-786-3822).