



United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE



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Report # B-7: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, October 2019.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) provides the following summary of recent activities of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

I. Federal Subsistence Fisheries

Update on Federal Subsistence Fishery Closures

Below average Chinook Salmon returns and highly variable returns of Sockeye Salmon resulted in numerous Federal subsistence fisheries being restricted or closed during the 2019 season.

Three Federal subsistence fisheries for Chinook Salmon were restricted or closed through Emergency Special Action in 2019. The Federal Subsistence Board limited the take of Chinook Salmon in the Kuskokwim River Drainage to federally qualified users specific to the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) Section 804. A subsistence user prioritization analysis was completed for subsistence harvest from June 1 to July 1, 2019. This analysis allowed the Federal in-season manager to open six 12-hour harvest opportunities for Chinook Salmon during that period. The Situk River in the Yakutat area was closed to the harvest of Chinook Salmon through Emergency Special Action by the Federal in-season manager due to low projected returns. The Stikine River was closed to the harvest of Chinook Salmon as the forecast for this run required an automatic closure through the Pacific Salmon Treaty due to no harvestable surplus.

Two Federal subsistence fisheries for Sockeye Salmon were closed through Emergency Special Action in 2019. The Federal in-season manager closed the harvest of early-run Sockeye Salmon in the Chignik River through Emergency Special Action due to low returns. The closure was rescinded after returns shifted to predominantly late-run Sockeye Salmon. The Stikine River was closed from July 21-31, to the harvest of Sockeye Salmon after the in-season assessment for this run prompted an automatic closure through the Pacific Salmon Treaty due to no harvestable surplus.

For further Fisheries information, contact our Office of Subsistence Management Fishery Biologist, Mr. Frank Harris, at frank_harris@fws.gov or 907-786-3396.

II. Migratory Bird Management

Update on Seabird Mortality Events and Monitoring

In May 2019, the Service began receiving reports of dead and dying seabirds from the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas. From late June to early August, thousands of Short-tailed Shearwaters were reported dead and washing up on beaches in the Bristol Bay region, or observed as weak and attempting to feed from salmon gillnets in inland waters. By mid-August, the shearwater die-off had extended north, in smaller numbers but widespread locations, into the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas along the coasts of Alaska and the Chukotka Peninsula of Russia. Puffins, murre, and auklets were reported, but at much lower numbers than shearwaters. Additionally, live short-tailed shearwaters have been observed in large numbers this August in the Gulf of Alaska, along the coasts of Glacier Bay and Kenai Fjords National Parks, and bays of Kodiak Island. It is unusual to see this species in high abundance in these areas because they typically reside offshore and come from the southern hemisphere to forage in the Bering and Chukchi Seas during the summer and fall.

Historically, seabird die-offs have occurred occasionally in Alaska; however, large die-off events have occurred each year since 2015. Dead birds have been examined from the Bering and Chukchi Seas during these recent die-off events and were determined to have died due to starvation. Seabird carcasses from the 2019 die-off events were collected from multiple locations and sent to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center for examination and testing. Initial results indicate starvation as the cause of death for most locations. However, in southeast Alaska, exposure to saxitoxin (a biotoxin associated with paralytic shellfish poisoning) was linked in June to a localized die off of breeding Arctic Terns. The USGS Alaska Science Center continues to analyze tissue samples for harmful algal bloom toxins and results will be shared as they become available. To date there has been no evidence of disease. While starvation has been determined to be the cause of death for all carcasses examined by the USGS during these recent events, exposure to biotoxins associated with harmful algal blooms may also be a contributing factor. The USGS is actively investigating how algal bloom biotoxins like saxitoxin affect birds. Little is known about the occurrence or effects of these toxins on wild seabirds, and it is difficult to detect the toxins in emaciated, dead birds.

This year's seabird mortality has been reported over a wide geographic region and throughout summer with the primary species affected being short-tailed shearwaters. With the exception of the localized die-off of Arctic Terns in southeast Alaska, starvation has been identified as the cause of death. The Service has posted an updated one-page information sheet on the 2019 mortality event, accessed directly at: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/aknatureandscience/upload/9Sep2019-Die-Off-USFWS-Factsheet-508C-revised-29Aug.pdf>

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