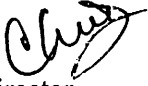


MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members

FROM: Chris Oliver 
Executive Director

DATE: March 17, 2009

SUBJECT: Groundfish Trawl Fishery and Pacific Walrus in Bristol Bay

ESTIMATED TIME 6 HOURS (All C-3 items)
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ACTION REQUIRED

Review discussion paper on northern Bristol Bay trawl and walrus.

BACKGROUND

In February 2008, the Council received letters from the Qayassiq Walrus Commission (QWC) and some Bristol Bay residents outlining concerns over interactions between Pacific walrus and the groundfish trawl fishing activities in the Bristol Bay region. The QWC requested regulatory changes to reduce trawling in the Nearshore Bristol Bay Trawl Area¹. The Council acknowledged receiving this information, and responded in a letter dated February 25, 2008 noting that the QWC concerns are largely addressed under the existing walrus protection areas adopted by the Council under Amendment 17 to the BSAI groundfish FMP and the larger Bristol Bay closed area adopted by the Council under Amendment 37.

In late August 2008, the Council received a request from the QWC to consider several proposals to increase protection for walrus habitat in the Nearshore Bristol Bay Trawl Area and a letter of similar concern from the Traditional Council of Togiak. At the October 2008 meeting, the Council received public comment on concerns over interactions between trawl fishing activities and Pacific walrus and their habitat in Bristol Bay, as well as more general concerns with regard to conflict between trawl fisheries and traditional fisheries in the area. Some residents of this region voiced concerns over potential disturbance to walrus and impacts on walrus feeding areas in the vicinity of the Nearshore Bristol Bay Trawl Area. Members of industry testified that in the near future, discussions will occur between industry and local residents to identify issues and potential solutions.

At the October 2008 meeting, the Council requested a discussion paper on the characteristics of the fishery in the Nearshore Bristol Bay Trawl Area including groundfish harvests, bycatch amounts, vessel participation, and levels of observer coverage. The Council also requested a review of information on the Pacific walrus population, and a description of conflicts that have occurred between fishing activities and walrus or their habitat during trawling, offloading, and any information on walrus takes in commercial fishing activity. That discussion paper (attached as item C-3(a)(1) without appendices) was sent out in a Council mailing on March 16, 2009.

¹ While all of Bristol Bay federal waters are generally closed to trawling east of 162° W longitude, an exception is the trawl area defined above where trawling primarily for yellowfin sole occurs during the open period April 1 to June 15.

Since initiating the discussion paper, Council staff has been informed of several voluntary industry initiatives to explore some of the concerns raised by the QWC and residents of the northern Bristol Bay region including meetings with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and residents of communities in northern Bristol Bay. The stated goal of these meetings as reported to Council staff by industry was to define the issues, identify problems, and seek solutions outside the Council or regulatory process. Council staff has been advised that industry will report on these initiatives at this meeting.

The northern Bristol Bay region has a variety of open and closed areas, including walrus and Steller sea lion protection closures (see map below).

