



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, December 2024.

Update on the 2023-2024 Alaska Seabird Mortality Events

From August 2023 to August 2024, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and partners documented dead and dying seabirds washing up on beaches (and in some instances, found inland) from the eastern Aleutian Islands northward to the Chukchi Sea. Reports included observations of short-tailed shearwaters, common murre, glaucous and glaucous-winged gulls. In 2023 and 2024, number of reported carcasses were lower compared to mortality events reported from 2017 to 2022. Causes of death in 2023 and 2024 include emaciation/starvation and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). Overall, reports of beached marine birds continue to be elevated compared to long-term averages.

Since 2022, there have been 367 detections of HPAI in Alaska, including seabirds (murre, kittiwake, shearwater, gull, tern, jaeger), foxes, and one polar bear. The USFWS continues to coordinate with Tribal, State, and Federal partners, as well as the Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team (COASST), to monitor beached bird trends and determine causes of death. The U.S. Geological Survey Alaska Science Center (USGS, Anchorage, AK) has tested sampled tissues collected during necropsies for the presence of saxitoxin and domoic acid, two biotoxins associated with harmful algal blooms (HABs). While HPAI has reduced the number of samples available for testing due to safety concerns, exposure to biotoxins does not appear to be linked to causes of death. Only one marine bird (a kittiwake) tested positive for saxitoxin in 2023.

Historically, seabird die-offs have occurred occasionally in Alaska; however, mortality events have occurred annually since 2015. The USFWS continues to coordinate with partners, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, COASST, Alaska Sea Grant, National Park Service, USGS, the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-management Council, and Tribal Councils. Together, we monitor the geographic extent, duration, and magnitude of die-offs and contribute those data to parallel efforts to monitor unusual mortality events of marine mammals in Alaska.

For further information, contact Robb Kaler, Seabird Biologist (robert_kaler@fws.gov), or January Frost, HPAI Coordinator (january_frost@fws.gov), USFWS Migratory Bird Office, Alaska Region.

Alaska Region's Climate Action Plan

In April 2024, the Alaska Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finalized our Regional Climate Action Plan (Plan). This plan was developed by a cross-programmatic team of USFWS

employees to identify objectives and actions the USFWS can take to address key priorities relating to climate change in the Region. The Plan identifies seven major themes, each of which contains a set of long-term objectives and shorter-term action items.

The themes are:

- Environmental Adaption and Resilience
- Climate Science
- Partnership, Engagement, and Co-Stewardship
- Climate Change Mitigation
- Plans and Strategies
- Capacity Building
- Communications

Although primarily focused on freshwater systems, the Plan identifies several actions to support fisheries and fish populations in the face of climate change. These actions range from specific, on-the-ground activities, such as removing fish-passage barriers at stream-road crossing sites, protecting riparian vegetation and investing in riparian restoration to support juvenile fishes, and continuing collaborations to expand the Alaska Stream Temperature Monitoring Network to prioritize restoration efforts, to decision-making activities, including ensuring that climate-related environmental data are incorporated into regulatory and management decisions for fisheries.

For more information, see the attached Climate Action Plan or please contact Nichole Bjornlie, Regional Threatened and Endangered Species Coordinator, at nichole_bjornlie@fws.gov.

Update on Continuing Process to Clarify Marine Mammal Harvest Eligibility

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) have received numerous inquiries related to Alaska Native marine mammal harvest eligibility and policy under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Eligibility is governed by section 101(b) of the MMPA and regulations developed by both FWS (at 50 C.F.R. § 18.3) and NMFS (at 50 C.F.R. § 216.3). The eligibility requirements have not changed, but NMFS and FWS are expeditiously working together to review those requirements. We'd like to provide an update on that process - what you can expect next - as well as a clarification of where we are now.

The core of this issue involves whether eligibility is determined solely based on blood quantum and what factors are relevant for assessing eligibility in the absence of proof of a minimum blood quantum. The Department of the Interior's Office of the Solicitor is evaluating this issue from a legal perspective in coordination with NOAA's Office of General Counsel. We expect their legal guidance will serve as a foundation for FWS and NMFS to work with our Alaska Native Organization co-management partners, Alaska Native Tribes, and others in an inclusive process to clarify and develop official guidance that is consistent across both Services under the current regulations and, if necessary, amend our implementing regulations.

Until new policy or guidance is in place, Office of Law Enforcement personnel for NMFS and FWS will continue to follow existing policy and practice. We understand the importance of this

review and process to hunters, Tribes, and Alaska Native Organizations across the state, and we also recognize how essential it is to provide clarity on eligibility while respecting Alaska Native cultural traditions and supporting shared conservation goals, including the need to ensure subsistence harvest levels are sustainable. We appreciate your patience, continued engagement, and partnership. You can expect to hear from us very soon on the following next steps:

- Comprehensive legal interpretation expected in December.
- Consultations and meetings begin December 2024 and continue into 2025.

**Subsistence-harvested marine mammals under NMFS jurisdiction include harbor seals, Steller sea lions, ringed seals, bearded seals, ribbon seals, spotted seals, northern fur seals, beluga whales, and bowhead whales. Sea otters, walrus, and polar bears are under the jurisdiction of FWS.*

Cook Inlet Fisheries Report

In 2024, 408 Federal subsistence fishing permits were issued during 2024, fewer than the previous three years. The reduction in permits is largely attributed to restrictions placed on users for not returning the 2023 record of harvest (i.e., the permit) to the issuing agency. The issued permits primarily cover federal fisheries on the Kenai and Kasilof rivers and are largely comprised of “Household” permits. Overall, the number of permits issued pertaining to federal fisheries in Cook Inlet continues to grow despite the small decrease in 2024.

By mid-November, 319 of 408 harvest reports have been returned reporting 5,739 harvested salmon. Nearly all the harvested salmon reported were comprised of Sockeye Salmon (n=5,737). Other species reported as harvested include two Pink Salmon from the Kenai River gillnet fishery. All harvest reports are due by January 15, 2025, 15 days after the close of the fishing season. Individuals that fail to return their harvest report for a specific permit by the January 15 deadline are restricted from receiving that permit type the following year.

The 2024 subsistence dip net fisheries for salmon on the Kenai and Kasilof rivers began June 15 and June 16, respectively. Harvest reported in-season in the dip net fishery at Russian River Falls was 847 Sockeye Salmon which is a decrease from 2023 (N=1,131). To date, post-season harvest reporting show that 1,184 Sockeye Salmon have been harvest from the Russian River. In addition, midway through the fishing season the Federal reporting phone number used by subsistence fishers failed and caused reporting difficulties. The rod and reel fishery on the Kenai River also opened on June 11 with the same seasons and areas as for the taking of fish under Alaska sport fishing regulations. Subsistence fishing by rod and reel methods is minimal yielding 22 Sockeye Salmon harvested from the Kenai River.

The Kasilof River community gillnet fishery began on June 16 and closed on August 15. Harvest reported by Ninilchik Traditional Council through August 15 includes 2,722 Sockeye Salmon. This harvest is a significant increase over the last several years (2023=1,978; 2022=973; and 2021=1,307 Sockeye Salmon). Fishing by gillnet occurred between June 18 and July 12, 2024. Regulatory periods for the Kenai River community gillnet fishery are from July 1 through August 15 and from September 10 – 30. Harvest of sockeye salmon in this fishery occurred

between July 19 and July 26, 2024. Reported harvest in this fishery by Ninilchik Traditional Council is 2,174 Sockeye Salmon, a decrease from 2,771 Sockeye Salmon during 2023. The decrease is attributed to the additional harvest from the Kasilof River and not fishery performance.

Overall reported harvest of Sockeye Salmon during 2024 (n=5,737) is similar to the prior five-year average of 5,842 (Figure 3.) Harvest is expected to exceed this five-year average once harvest reporting is completed. Sockeye Salmon remain to be the primary target species with minimal harvest of other salmon species such as Chinook and Coho salmon. Since 2011, six Chinook Salmon have been reported as being harvested. Coho Salmon harvest also remains low and variable from year to year. Peak Coho Salmon harvest of 65 fish occurred in 2020.

Coordination with local Alaska Department of Fish and Game management biologists began in early spring and continued throughout the summer in 2024. Preseason consultation with the Ninilchik Traditional Council occurred prior to the start of the fishing season and coordination and communication was ongoing throughout the summer. Post-season evaluation is ongoing, and a post-season consultation meeting with the Ninilchik Traditional Council will on November 20, 2024. No Emergency Special Actions were issued during 2024 fishing season within the Cook Inlet area despite region wide restrictions implemented by the State of Alaska to sport, commercial, and personal use fisheries aimed to conserve Chinook Salmon stocks. For more information, please contact Kenneth Gates, Senior Fisheries Biologist, Cook Inlet Area In-season Federal Subsistence Fisheries Manager Southern Alaska Fish and Wildlife Field Office, at ken_gates@fws.gov.

Gravel to Gravel

The Gravel to Gravel project, initiated by the Department of Interior made progress towards co-stewardship of Salmon conservation challenges in the Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Northern Bering Sea region. On October 16th, 2024, the Gravel to Gravel partners signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that focuses on the following objectives:

1. Collaborate across jurisdictional and geographic boundaries through co-stewardship and co-management to restore the health of, and relationships between, salmon, people, and place.
2. Build and maintain trust and communication, and strengthen relationships between Tribes and federal agencies, to increase capacity and knowledge sharing around the care for salmon.
3. Honor tribal sovereignty and self-governance by advocating for tribal stewardship and tribal recommendations regarding decision-making and regulatory authority in wildlife ecosystems and fisheries management.
4. The Parties will work in partnership on ecosystem restoration and resilience, salmon conservation, and other projects that are within and adjacent to the Gravel to Gravel Keystone Initiative and include expertise from Indigenous and Traditional Knowledges.

Staffing

Boyd Blihovde, the Regional Director's Senior Advisor for Conservation will be attending the December Council meeting in person.