



NORTH PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

605 W. 4th Ave. Suite 306
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 271-2809
Fax (907) 271-2817

Action Memo

File Number: Cons 14-010

Agenda Date 4/7/2014

Agenda Number: C6

Eric Olson, Chairman
Chris Oliver, Executive Director

SUBJECT:

Round Island Transit: Final action

ESTIMATED TIME:

4 hours

ACTION REQUIRED:

Review EA/RIR/IRFA, select Preferred Alternative

BACKGROUND:

Vessels with Federal Fisheries Permits (FFP) are prohibited from transiting through walrus protection areas around Round Island and Cape Pierce in northern Bristol Bay. Until implementation of GOA FMP Amendment 83, vessels with FFPs tendering herring or salmon in the Togiak Bay fishery were able to surrender their FFP during the tendering season and transit the protection areas, with the expectation that they could reactivate their FFP after the tendering season. GOA Amendment 83, unrelated to any action in northern Bristol Bay, prevents vessels from surrendering their FFP and reactivating it within a three year period. As a result, vessels with FFPs face risk of fine if they pass through walrus protection areas, or must surrender their FFPs for three years in order to tender herring or salmon for the northern Bristol Bay fisheries.

The purpose of this action is to maintain suitable protection for walrus on Round Island, to restore access to vessels with FFPs serving as tenders for the northern Bristol Bay herring and salmon fisheries to the routes used by tenders before implementation of GOA FMP Amendment 83, and to allow vessels delivering groundfish access to the route north of Round Island to reduce the likelihood of disturbance to walrus on Hagemeister Island.

The Council adopted the following alternatives for analysis in April, 2013. Alternatives 2 and 3 are not exclusive.

Alternative 1 is the No Action alternative, and would not establish any transit areas through walrus protection areas at Round Island or Cape Peirce. Any vessel with a FFP is prohibited from transiting through these areas.

Alternative 2 would establish a transit area in the EEZ north of Round Island, open from April 1 through August 15, annually. There are three options analyzed:

1. Establish a transit area north of a line from 58° 47.90' N, 160° 21.91' W to 58° 32.94' N, 159° 35.45' W, maintaining a minimum of 3 nm from Round Island. **Preliminary Preferred Alternative**
2. Establish a transit area north of a line from 58° 46.22' N, 160° 10.92' W to 58° 34.74' N, 159° 34.79' W, maintaining a minimum of 4.5 nm from Round Island.
3. Establish a transit area north of a line from 58° 46.77' N, 160° 7.75' W to 58° 36.48' N, 159° 34.23' W,

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maintaining a minimum of 6 nm from Round Island.

Alternative 3 would establish a transit area in the EEZ near Cape Peirce, open from April 1 through August 15, annually. There is one option analyzed, establish a transit area east of a line from 58° 30.00'N, 161° 46.20' W to 58° 21.00'N, 161° 46.20'W. **Preliminary Preferred Alternative**

At the December 2013 Council meeting, the Council chose Alternative 2, Option 1, and Alternative 3 as its Preliminary Preferred Alternative (PPA).

None of the alternatives considered are expected to change the timing, duration, effort, or harvest levels in the herring, salmon, or groundfish fisheries in northern Bristol Bay. Action is limited to transit through walrus protection areas by vessels with FFPs. Therefore, no substantial changes are expected on groundfish or other fish species, habitat, ecosystem components, or seabirds. Potential impacts are limited to direct take (ship strike) or disturbance to marine mammals including Pacific walrus, Steller sea lions, bearded seals, ringed seals, spotted seals, and harbor seals. Levels of direct take via ship strike of marine mammals are very low. Because none of the alternatives would change the level of fishing or other vessel traffic in the area, the effects of the alternatives on direct take of marine mammals are expected to be insignificant.

Disturbance to Pacific walrus and Steller sea lions hauled out on Round Island and Hagemeister Island is possible for all alternatives. Alternative 1 has incrementally less likelihood for disturbance of marine mammals hauled out on Round Island because vessels with FFPs would not be allowed to transit within 12 nm of the island. However, vessels circumnavigating the walrus protection area would transit close to a walrus haulout on Hagemeister Island, potentially increasing disturbance to animals hauled out there.

Alternative 2 would allow vessels with FFPs to transit the Round Island walrus protection area from April 1 through August 15, with options to allow transit at increasing distances from Round Island. Vessels have been recorded to disturb walrus on haulouts on Round Island, but no disturbance events have been observed for vessels passing more than 3 nm from the island (outside the State of Alaska no transit zone). Because none of the options would allow vessels within 3 nm of Round Island, the likelihood for disturbance to marine mammals hauled out on the island is very low, and any impacts to walrus or other marine mammals are expected to be insignificant.

Alternative 3 would allow vessels with FFPs to transit the Cape Peirce walrus protection area from April 1 through August 15, east of a line from 58.50°N, 161.77°W to 58.35°N, 161.77°W. This alternative could reduce the potential for disturbance to walrus hauled out at Cape Peirce and nearby haulouts compared to status quo.

Implementation of any alternative would require NMFS to monitor the activities of Federally-permitted vessels to ensure that vessels comply with existing regulations. Existing Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) are likely sufficient to monitor the groundfish fisheries, but may require changes in polling rates to ensure compliance with transit provisions. Costs would be borne by the vessel owners, and are approximated to be \$25.88 per month for each additional poll. Adding a single poll would result in estimated annual costs of \$944.40, adding two additional polls would result in estimated annual costs of \$1,073.80.

Allowing vessels to transit the Round Island walrus protection area, rather than circumnavigating the protection area and transiting through Hagemeister Strait to access Togiak Bay would save an estimated 6-8 hours per trip, and \$2,545 to \$4,686 in fuel costs per trip.

At this meeting, the Council will review the EA/RIR/IRFA and select a Preferred Alternative.