

May 26, 2023

Mr. Simon Kinneen, Chair
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
1007 West Third Avenue, # 400
Anchorage, AK 99501

RE: Agenda Item D2 – Programmatic EIS

Chairman Kinneen and Members of the Council,

We write today regarding the draft Purpose and Need statement and range of alternatives for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's (Council) development of a programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS). We strongly support the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) undertaking this effort and appreciate the opportunity to offer some brief thoughts on the draft document under consideration.

The existing programmatic supplemental EIS under which the Council currently operates does not address the dramatic and increasing changes in the marine environment that have occurred since it was developed in 2004, nor does it adequately address the full suite of direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of federal fisheries on the marine ecosystem, including Indigenous communities, within the context of climate change. Development of a new PEIS should seek to provide a clear and robust evaluation of the full suite of impacts of federal fisheries in the North Pacific. The evaluation should account for uncertainty in future climate scenarios, including declining productivity, shifts in species distributions and abundance, habitat loss and fragmentation, changes in food web dynamics, etc. The process should also meaningfully engage Tribes and Tribal organizations, including the incorporation of Tradition Knowledge as a fundamental component of the best scientific information available.

We appreciate the thought and effort of the Ecosystem Committee and staff in developing the draft purpose and need statement for the programmatic EIS under consideration at this meeting. We feel that the draft largely captures the intent of the Council in developing this process, and offer the following comments for consideration in further developing this document:

- 1) The range of alternatives evaluated through the PEIS should include consideration of meaningful changes to the Council's fishery conservation and management measures, including but not limited to harvest control rules, closed areas and habitat protections, bycatch management and Tribal consultation and engagement. The current groundfish management policy and associated objectives developed through the 2004 programmatic supplemental environmental impact statement remain relevant and needed. Rather than limiting the PEIS to consideration of changes to these objectives, the Council should evaluate alternative management approaches to better achieve those existing objectives.

- 2) The analysis should extend beyond just an evaluation of impacts to fishery management unit species. The PEIS should include an analysis of the impacts of federal fisheries on prohibited species such as salmon, halibut and herring; as well as other non-target species caught in federal groundfish fisheries such as squid and other forage species. The PEIS should also identify and evaluate indirect and cumulative impacts to other managed and protected species such as marine mammals and seabirds. Additionally, the range of alternatives developed through the PEIS should include management approaches aimed at avoiding and minimizing adverse impacts to prohibited, non-target, and other managed and protected species.
- 3) The PEIS should include a full evaluation of the direct and cumulative impacts of federal fisheries on subsistence communities as well as ecologically important marine habitats. Fishing communities, and in particular Indigenous subsistence communities, are fundamental components of coupled social and ecological marine ecosystems. Likewise, healthy marine ecosystems require functioning and intact benthic habitat. The PEIS should evaluate the impacts of federal fisheries on these critical ecosystem components and develop a range of alternatives that include management measures that avoid and minimize adverse impacts, helping to ensure the continued health and productivity of North Pacific marine ecosystems.
- 4) The PEIS should not include an evaluation of the Arctic Fishery Management Plan. There are not now, nor have there been, federal fisheries in the Arctic Fishery Management Area of the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas. Therefore, there are no environmental impacts of federal fisheries to evaluate or analyze. If the Council is considering development of any new fishery in the Arctic, it should conduct a separate and focused analytical process that conforms to both the National Environmental Policy Act as well as the rigorous scientific and management criteria outlined in the Arctic Fishery Management Plan.

We understand that this nascent process will be iterative and that anticipated outcomes and outputs will adapt accordingly. However, we hope and believe that the PEIS will provide meaningful opportunities to fundamentally consider the Council's existing management framework, and potential changes or alternative approaches that better allow the Council to fulfill its conservation and management obligations.

Thank you very much for your commitment to this process and for your consideration of these comments.

Sincerely,



Steve Marx

Senior Officer, The Pew Charitable Trusts

smarx@pewtrusts.org