

**NOAA
FISHERIES**

Protected Resources

Endangered Species Updates and Marine Mammal Hot Topics

Prepared by AKR Protected Resources Division and
AFSC Marine Mammal Laboratory

Anne Marie Eich
NPFMC Meeting
June 2026

Overview

- Species and stocks in Alaska
- Hot topics for NMFS in Alaska
- Focus on marine mammals listed under the Endangered Species Act
 - Current status
 - ESA actions: Critical Habitat, Recovery Plan, 5-Year Review
 - Threats
 - Fishery Interactions
 - Current management and research



Marine mammal species and stocks in Alaska

(as described in the 2024 NMFS Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Reports)

	Total	Pinnipeds	Cetaceans
Species	27	8	19
Stocks	55	20	35
Stocks with Alaska Native subsistence harvest*	25	18	7
Stocks with U.S. commercial fisheries serious injury or death*	23	12	11
Stocks with both fisheries and subsistence takes*	12	11	1
Stocks with federal U.S. commercial fishery M/SI resulting in Cat II placement (no Cat I)	4	1	3

*stocks with ≥ 0.5 individuals taken on average per year



NOAA
FISHERIES

Gulf of Alaska Chinook - No ESA Listing Warranted

- On May 14, 2026, NMFS published a 12-month finding (91 FR 27271) and defined 3 ESUs for GOA Chinook salmon:
 - Southeast Gulf of Alaska – all populations in Alaska east of Cape Fairweather
 - Central Gulf of Alaska – populations from Cape Fairweather through Cordova
 - Northwest Gulf of Alaska – populations from Cook Inlet, the Kenai Peninsula, and the South Alaska Peninsula
- Environmental variability is the most significant threat to all three ESUs
- While current run sizes are trending low for many Gulf of Alaska stocks, fluctuations in abundance and productivity are typical of salmon populations, and many Gulf of Alaska stocks remain within the scope of historical variability or are showing signs of stabilization
- Despite some declines in abundance and productivity, the ESUs exhibit large overall population sizes spread across multiple stocks, viable levels of productivity, broad spatial distributions, and high genetic and ecological diversity.
- High-quality, intact habitat, as well as proactive conservation and management practices, support population viability in each ESU.

After conducting both a demographic risk analysis and an analysis of threats, all three Gulf of Alaska Chinook salmon ESUs were determined to be at low risk of extinction now and in the foreseeable future.



NOAA
FISHERIES

Hot Topics: Fur Seals

Conservation & DNA Analysis

- NMFS and Tribal Co-managers are continuing to explore implementation of high priority conservation actions in the Northern Fur Seal Conservation Plan.
- NPRB funding to develop an efficient DNA-based approach to provide timely northern fur seal diet data for multi-species stock assessment models.



Salmon Predation & Modeling

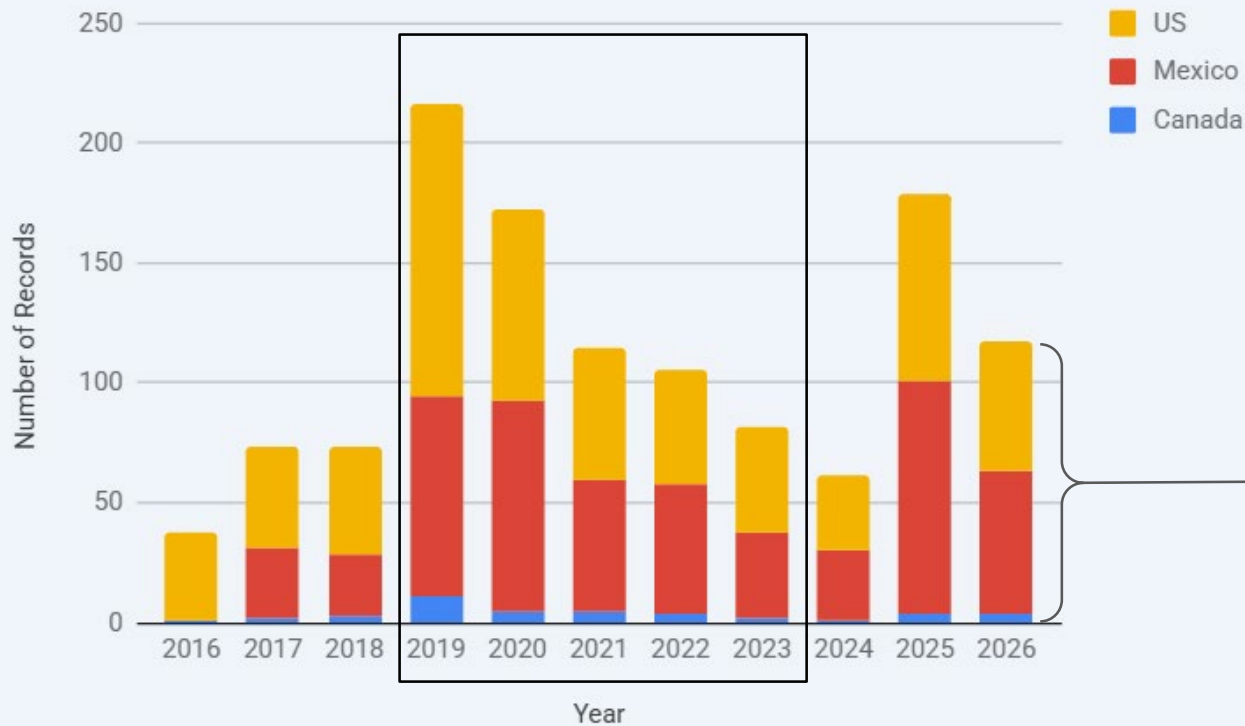
- Northern Bering Sea IERP funding uses DNA metabarcoding to investigate predation from Pribilof fur seals on Yukon River salmon stocks.
- Expansion of CEATTLE model to dynamically link fur seal energetics and population models to walleye pollock stock assessments.



Hot Topics: Gray Whales

Unusual Mortality Event: December 17, 2018 - November 9, 2023

Yearly Totals by Region (2016-2026)



As of 5/27/2026

Source: NOAA Marine Mammal Stranding and Health Program



NOAA
FISHERIES

Hot Topics: Killer Whales

Increased KW bycatch in trawl in Alaska

- Increasing in recent years
- Spike in 2023

2023

- 9 Flatfish Trawl (A80)
- 1 Pollock Trawl (AFA)

Of these:

- 6 Killed by gear
- 3 Previously dead
- 1 Seriously injured

Recent Updates

- In 2024, A80 deepwater flats trawl fishers began testing a gear modification to discourage killer whales from entering the net mouth
- AFSC is working to update abundance estimates in 2026 (2026 Navy-funded, UW-led, NMFS-partnered cetacean survey in the Gulf of Alaska) and 2027 (planned killer whale survey in the Bering Sea)
- AFSC is revisiting the stock structure



NOAA
FISHERIES

Hot topics: Concerns from our MMPA Co-managers potentially of interest to NPFMC

- Indigenous Knowledge: Increase the use of IK in scientific research and management decisions, and individuals should be compensated for their time spent communicating IK
- Vessel traffic impacts to marine mammals / subsistence: concerns over increase in number of fishing vessels, scientific vessels, cruise ships, ice breakers and their impact on marine mammals, habitat loss, competition of prey species
- Food safety and security: concerns over harmful algal blooms, bird die-offs, effects from changes in fish populations, need to test catch to ensure that it is safe to eat
- Marine Debris: large amounts of marine debris have been seen on multiple occasions in the Bering Strait region



Overview

- Species and stocks in Alaska
- Hot topics for NMFS in Alaska
- Focus on marine mammals listed under the Endangered Species Act
 - Current status
 - ESA actions: Critical Habitat, Recovery Plan, 5-Year Review
 - Threats
 - Fishery Interactions
 - Current management and research



Cook Inlet Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*)



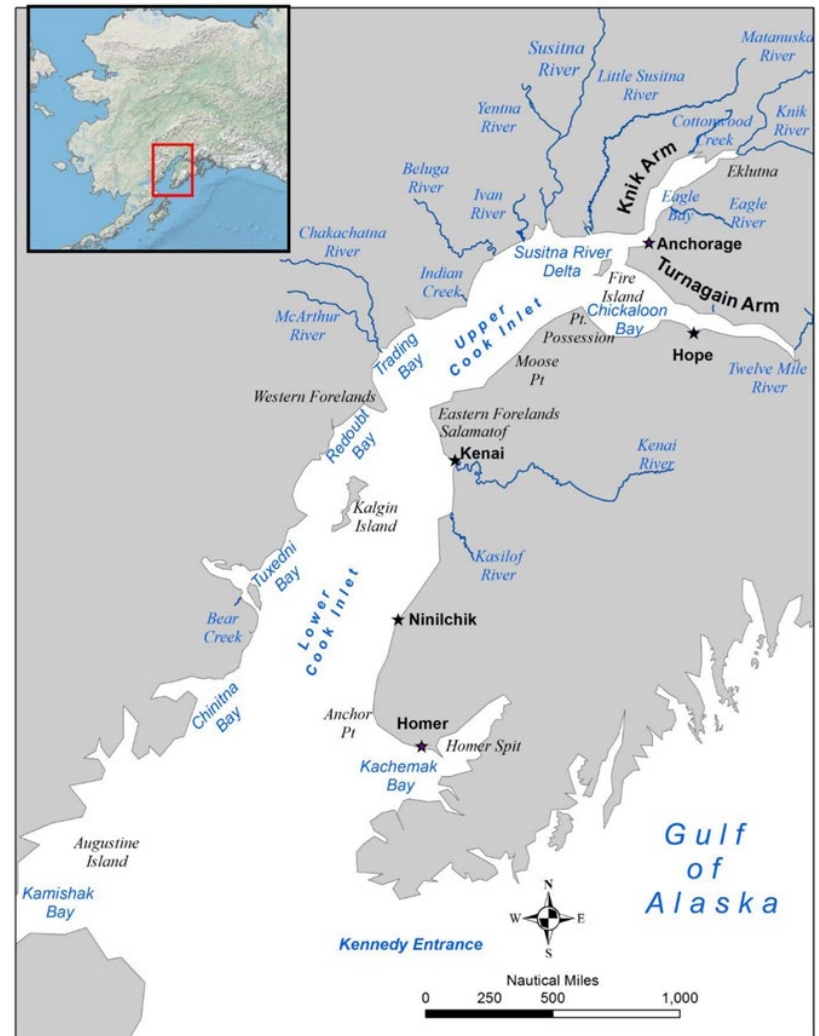
Distribution: Cook Inlet, Alaska

Live year-round in the inlet, with distribution influenced by seasonal fish runs

Population Size:

331 (95% CI: 290-386; Goetz et al. 2023)

*Survey to assess abundance conducted in 2025



NOAA
FISHERIES

Cook Inlet Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

Endangered Species Act

- Cook Inlet DPS - Endangered
- Recovery Plan: Yes
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2022



Photo Credit: Paul Wade, NOAA Fisheries

Threats & Interactions

- Threats: catastrophic events (e.g., oil spill), noise, cumulative effects, disease, habitat loss/degradation, reduction in prey, predation, pollution, unauthorized take, subsistence hunting
- Fisheries gear interactions: some animals have confirmed or potential entanglement scars (McGuire et al. 2020)

Current actions:

- Petitions
 - Petition to Cap Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Take Authorizations
 - Petition for a Rulemaking to Establish a Cook Inlet Beluga Protection Zone in Tuxedni Bay, Alaska



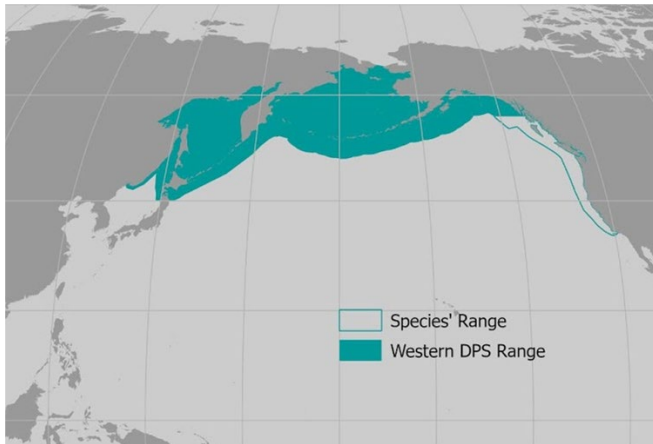
NOAA
FISHERIES

Western Distinct Population Segment (DPS) Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*)



Western DPS (endangered) - west of 144° W. long. & mixing zone in northern SE AK

Eastern DPS (delisted in 2013) - east of 144° W. long.



U.S. Population Size (2025 survey: Sweeney et al. 2025):

- **Non-pups: 38,911** (95% CI 35,738-42,090)
- **Pups: 12,762** (95% CI 11,947-13,624)

High variability among regions

Negative impacts from the Heatwave

- Continued **significant decline** of non-pups ($-5.35\% \text{ y}^{-1}$) and pups ($-4.34\% \text{ y}^{-1}$) in western Aleutian Islands
- Continued **significant decline** in western region of central Aleutian Islands
- Non-pups in western GOA 2009-2024 **now stable** (had been increasing as of 2021)
- Non-pups in the eastern GOA region **significantly declined** & pups stable between 2009-2024 (non-pups had been stable & pups had been increasing as of 2021)



NOAA
FISHERIES

Western DPS Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Endangered
- Recovery Plan: Yes
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2020



Threats & Interactions

- Threats: Effects of fisheries on prey, environmental variability, predation, disease, contaminants, entanglement, illegal shooting
- Fisheries gear interactions: trawl, longline, salmon hook & line, gillnet

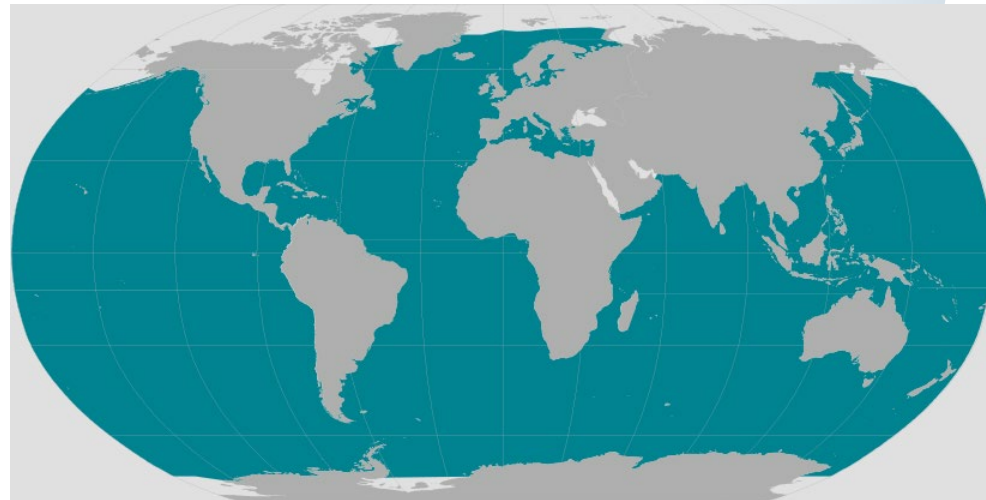
Current management & research focus: abundance, vital rates (reproductive rates and survival), contaminants, disease, entanglement, deterrents, illegal shooting, illegal feeding



NOAA
FISHERIES

Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)

- Globally distributed with extensive home ranges that can span ocean basins
- Population structure not adequately defined, and no recent and reliable estimates for population size or trend off Alaska (i.e., the North Pacific Stock)
- In 2025, NMFS initiated a review to evaluate all available data to inform population structure (e.g., genetics, movements, tagging data, social association patterns, call types). Based on the outcome of this review, NMFS will consider revising stock designations in a future stock assessment report.



Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Endangered
- Recovery Plan: Yes
- Critical Habitat: No
- Last 5-Year Review: 2015;
reinitiated on May 27, 2021



Threats & Interactions

- Threats: environmental conditions, marine debris, ocean noise, oil spills and contaminants, vessel strikes, entanglement
- Fisheries gear interactions: yes; documented to remove fish from longline gear

Current management & research focus: stock assessment; fisheries interactions



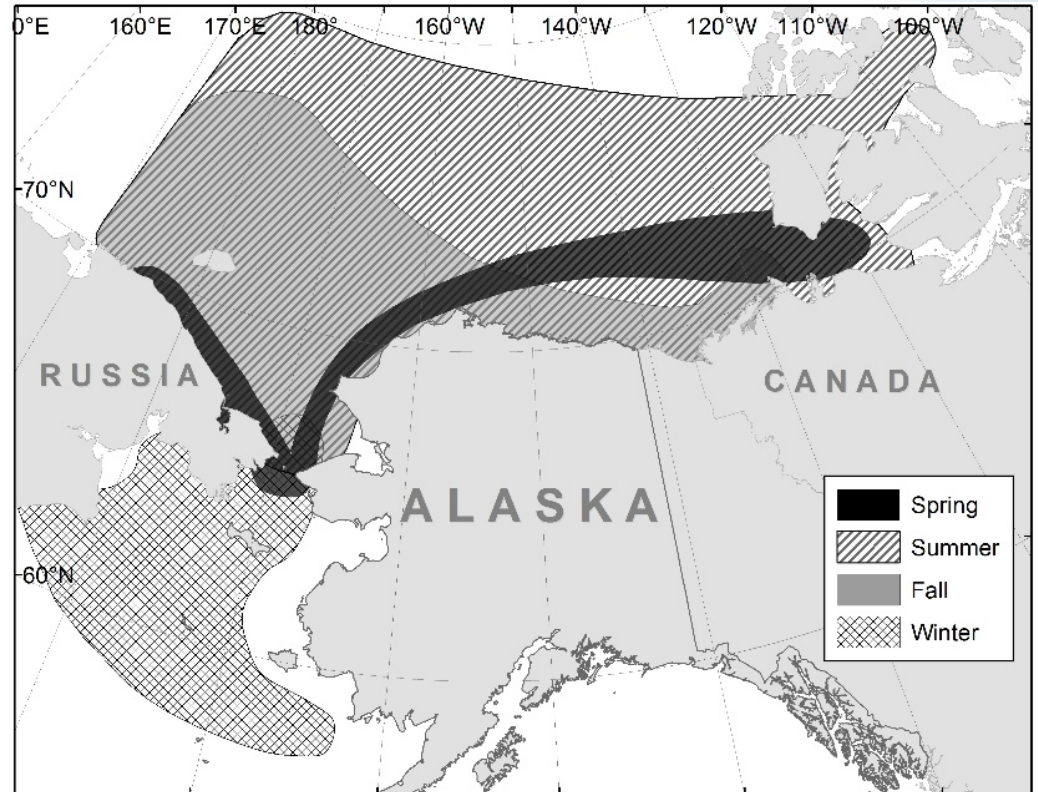
NOAA
FISHERIES

Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)



Four stocks world wide,
only one in U.S. waters,
the Western Arctic Stock

Population Size for
Western Arctic Stock:
17,175



NOAA
FISHERIES

Bowhead Whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)

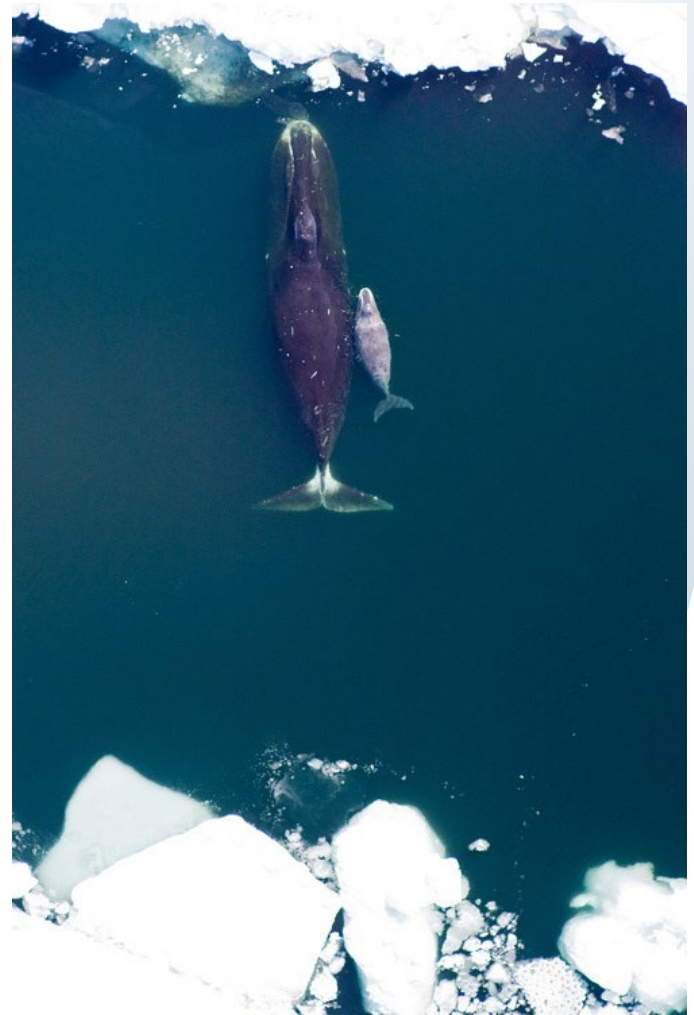
Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Endangered
- Recovery Plan: No
- Critical Habitat: No
- Last 5-Year Review: Rely on IWC's reviews

Threats & Interactions

- Threats: environmental changes, noise pollution, vessel strike
- Fisheries gear interactions: pot fishery gear

Current management & research focus: abundance estimate (aerial survey completed summer 2025, [webstory](#))



NOAA
FISHERIES

North Pacific Right Whale (*Eubalaena japonica*)

Two Stocks:

- Eastern and Western Pacific

Population Size:

- Eastern - 31

(95% confidence interval 23-54;
based on Bering Sea and Aleutian
Islands individuals only)

- Western - unknown, likely
in the hundreds



NOAA
FISHERIES

North Pacific Right Whale (*Eubalaena japonica*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Endangered
- Recovery Plan: Yes
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2024



Threats & Interactions

- Threats: vessel strikes; environmental changes
- Fisheries gear interactions: unknown, potentially pot gear

Current management & research focus: abundance estimate; habitat use and movement patterns; considering revision of critical habitat after being petitioned

- One of the priority species for the 2026 Navy-funded, UW-led, NMFS-partnered cetacean survey in the Gulf of Alaska



NOAA
FISHERIES

Arctic Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida hispida*)

Ringed seals have a circumpolar distribution; the Arctic ringed seal is the only stock that occurs in US Waters.

- Chukchi Sea - 592,577 (95% CI: 478,448 - 733,929; Boveng et al. 2024)
- Remainder of Range - unknown, anticipated >1M



NOAA
FISHERIES

Arctic Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida hispida*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Threatened
- Recovery Plan: In progress
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: 2024



Threats & Interactions

- Threats: climate change, habitat loss due to sea ice decline
- Fisheries gear interactions: infrequent; some in BSAI flatfish and pollock trawls

Current management & research focus: abundance estimate, harvest monitoring, population structure



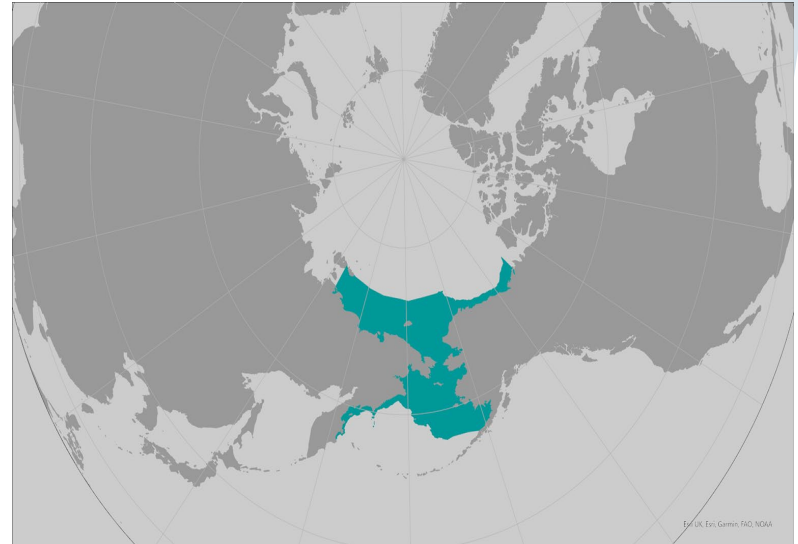
NOAA
FISHERIES

Beringia Distinct Population Segment (DPS) Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus nauticus*)

Bearded seals have a circumpolar distribution.

The Beringia Stock is the only stock that occurs in US Waters.

- Chukchi Sea - 147,421 (95% CI: 114,155-190,380 - 733,929; Boveng et al. 2024)
- Remainder of Range - unknown, anticipated >500k



Beringia DPS Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus nauticus*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: Threatened
- Recovery Plan: In progress
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: In progress



Threats & Interactions

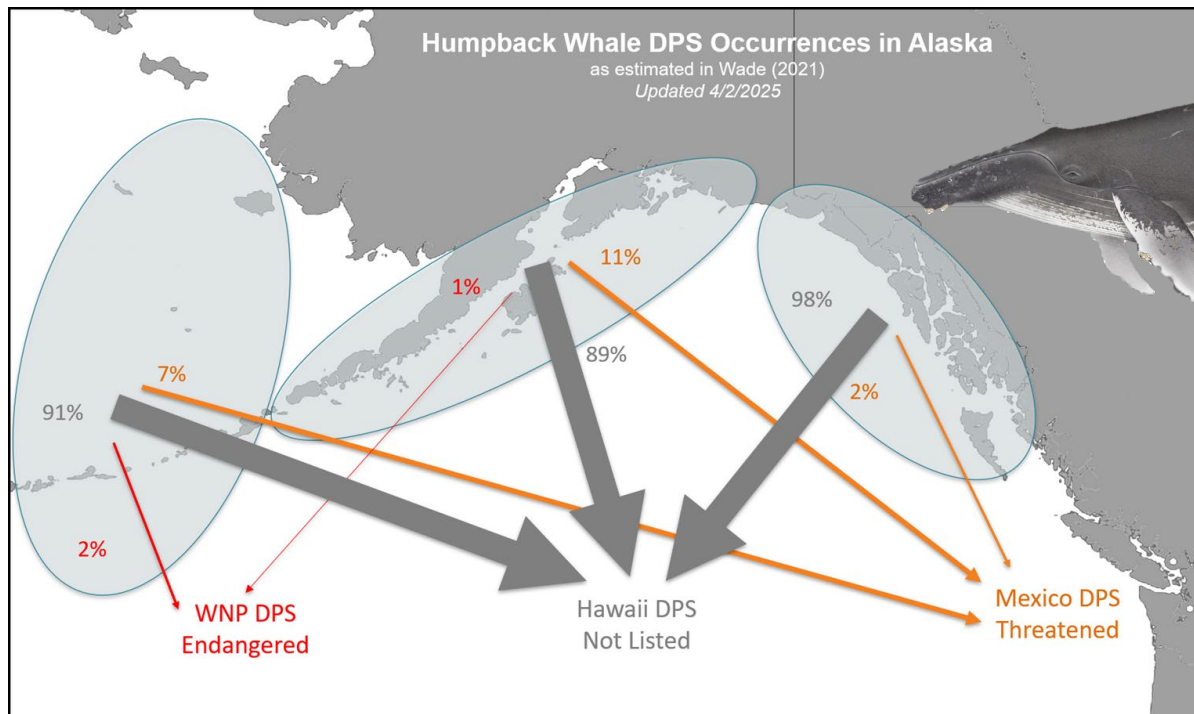
- Threats: climate change, habitat loss due to sea ice decline
- Fisheries gear interactions: infrequent; some in BSAI flatfish and pollock trawls

Current management & research focus: distribution and abundance estimates, passive acoustic monitoring, stock structure



NOAA
FISHERIES

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)



Western North Pacific

- ESA - Endangered
- Stock = DPS
- Population estimate of stock N= 1,084

Hawaii

- ESA - Not listed
- Stock = DPS
- Population estimate of stock N= 11,278

Mexico

- ESA - Threatened
- Stock = Mexico-North Pacific; a subsection of the DPS
- Population estimate of stock N= 2,352



NOAA
FISHERIES

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

Endangered Species Act

- ESA Status: DPS specific
- Recovery Plan: Yes, update in progress
- Critical Habitat: Yes
- Last 5-Year Review: In progress

Threats & Interactions

- Threats: entanglement, vessel strikes, prey availability, ocean noise, vessel-based harassment
- Fisheries gear interactions: pots, gillnet, especially vulnerable to fixed gear



Current management & research focus: abundance estimates, food limitations



NOAA
FISHERIES

Questions?



NOAA Fisheries/Josh M London



NOAA
FISHERIES

Request for feedback

- Was this level of information helpful?
- What additional information would be helpful?

