

Steller Sea Lion Biological Opinion and EA/RIR, Council motion

The Council moves the Advisory Panel's recommendations with changes noted. Additions are shown underlined and deletions in strikethrough.

The Council ~~AP~~ recommends that NMFS consider ~~the adopt~~ the following as a preferred alternative for a Reasonable and Prudent Alternative (RPA).

RPA Alternative 4: SSL protection with sustainable fisheries and communities ~~reduced economic impacts on Aleutian Islands cod and mackerel fisheries.~~

Unless otherwise stated, the existing protection measures in 50 CFR 679 remain in place.

Atka mackerel

Remove existing 'platoon' system in areas 542 and 543

Area 543:

- No fishing inside critical habitat
- Fishing outside critical habitat east of 174 degrees – 30 minutes East longitude
- TAC not to exceed 65% of ABC
- A season Jan 20 to June 10, B season June 10 to Nov 1
- No more than 50% of TAC harvested in A or B season
- No rollover between A and B seasons

Area 542:

- No fishing inside critical habitat from 178 degrees – 0 minutes East longitude to 180 degrees – 0 minutes longitude.
- TAC not to exceed 65% of ABC
- Catch inside critical habitat (outside Trawl Exclusion Zones) not to exceed 50% of TAC
- A season Jan 20 to June 10, B season June 10 to Nov 1
- No more than 50% of TAC harvested in A or B season
- No rollover between A and B seasons

Area 541:

- Status quo, except A season January 20 to June 10, B season June 10 to November 1

Pacific cod trawl

Area 543:

- No cod trawling in critical habitat east of 174 degrees 30 minutes East longitude
- Cod trawling in critical habitat west of 174 degrees 30 minutes from 10 nm and out from February 15 to March 15
- Cod trawl harvest limited to no more than 2.5% of BS/AI ABC

Area 541 and Area 542 east of 178 degrees West Longitude:

- Trawl cod fishery is A Season only (January 20 to June 10)
- Trawl cod fishery inside critical habitat is only east of 178 degrees W to 541 management border
- No inside critical habitat cod fishing west of 178 degrees W to 177 degrees E
- Increase haulout closures to 10 nm for cod trawl between 170 degrees W to 174 W
- Status quo West of 174 W to 178 W

Pacific cod fixed gear

No additional restrictions on vessels under 60' using fixed gear jig-gear.

Area 543:

- Prohibit directed fishery for Pacific cod.

~~Areas 542 and 543:~~

- Cod fishery is limited to B season only (June 10 to November 1)
- Critical habitat open outside 3-4 nm from rookeries and haulouts

Area 541:

- No new 541 restrictions on fixed gear cod fishing

~~The AP believes that RPA 4 allows for a more effective adaptive management opportunity. Allowing selective fisheries to occur in areas of lower concern provides the potential to contrast the effect of fishing on Steller sea lion stocks. We strongly encourage NMFS and all other sources of cooperative research to fund and develop plans to closely monitor and analyze changes in fisheries and sea lion stocks that may lead to better understanding of the reasons for changes in sea lion stock size throughout the range of the Western DPS.~~

The Council strongly encourages NMFS to develop a research plan which considers the SSC recommendations to address data and information gaps regarding the decline of Steller sea lions in Area 543 and the slow Steller sea lion recovery in Areas 542 and 541, and to immediately initiate budget and funding discussions within the agency to support the research plan.

The Council notes SSC concerns and recommendations for the analysis including:

- stating as fact some conclusions that still have a great deal of uncertainty about them such as past conservation methods having a "positive impact on reducing the impacts of the fishery exploitation strategy on Steller sea lions";
- assumptions underlying the BiOp analysis including biomass projection methodology, biomass apportionment, and nutritional stress as the causal factor for low natality ;
- the global scale of the RPA relative to the current information base and conservation goal; and
- questions raised in the editorial comments of the SSC

and therefore recommends an independent review of the BiOp.

The Council recommends the agency include a 2-year sunset provision in their rule making.