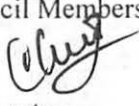


MEMORANDUM

TO: AP and Council Members
FROM: Chris Oliver 
Executive Director
DATE: June 1, 2011
SUBJECT: Essential Fish Habitat

ESTIMATED TIME 6 HOURS (All C-3 items)
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ACTION REQUIRED

- (a) Review Habitat Conservation Area Boundary
- (b) Review Northern Bering Sea Research Plan Report

Background

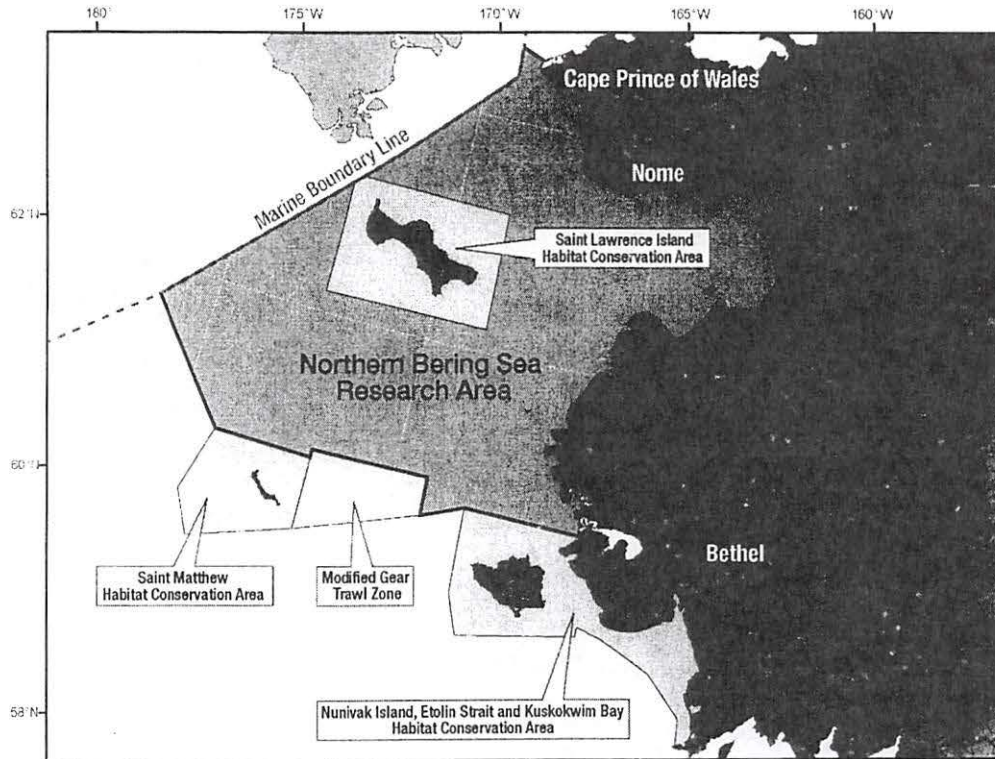
(a) Review Nunivak Island-Etolin Straits-Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area Boundary

In July 2007, the Council adopted Amendment 89 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP, Bering Sea Habitat Conservation measures, which created a number of habitat conservation areas in which bottom trawling is prohibited. One of these areas is the Nunivak Island-Etolin Straits-Kuskokwim Bay Habitat Conservation Area (Nunivak HCA; see map on reverse). A summary of Amendment 89 is attached as Item C-3(a)(1).

During the Council's consideration of Amendment 89, the boundaries for the Nunivak HCA were developed in close consultation with an industry and Association of Village Council Presidents (AVCP) working group. Communities and industry agreed on a southern boundary line for the habitat conservation area, which was subsequently established in regulation. The flatfish industry members committed to continued work with the AVCP communities in an ongoing process to communicate and share information on fishing activities and scientific information about the area, and if appropriate, to consider additional protection of subsistence uses and resources for the affected communities. The agreement that was reached in March 2007 is attached as Item C-3(b)(2).

As part of the Council's final motion adopting the closure, the Council agreed to review the boundary line developed for the Nunivak HCA in four years, and to consider whether further action is appropriate. That boundary review is the subject of this agenda item. Members of the public have the opportunity to inform the Council whether there is any conflict concerning the existing Nunivak HCA boundary, or whether further action or additional protection for subsistence is needed.

Options for Council action could be to initiate analysis of a new boundary or other protection measure, to take no action, or to request further information prior to initiating an action.



(b) Review development of the Northern Bering Sea Research Area (NBSRA) Research Plan

The Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC), at the request of the Council, is developing a scientific research plan for the NBSRA, to study the effects of bottom trawling on the benthic community. The NBSRA (see map above) was established by the Council, became effective in 2008, and is currently closed to bottom trawl fishing. The primary goals of the plan would be to use the research area to investigate the effects of bottom trawling on bottom habitat, and provide information to help with developing future protection measures in the NBSRA for crab, marine mammals, endangered species, and the subsistence needs of western Alaska communities. The AFSC is currently developing the research plan.

An update on the research plan progress will be presented by Dr Cynthia Yeung, the AFSC project lead for its development. Background materials were distributed to the Council in mid-May. Dr Yeung will present an outline of the research plan to date, and information on designing trawl impact studies (Item C-3(b)(1)). Dr Yeung will also provide a summary of relevant information from the northern Bering Sea section of the 2010 AFSC RACE bottom trawl survey.

A science workshop was held at the Alaska Marine Science Symposium in January 2011. A synthesis of the workshop is included as Item C-3(b)(2). Also, a second community/subsistence workshop is planned for September 12, 2011, to take place in Nome. The milestones and timeline for the plan development is attached as Item C-3(b)(3); the AFSC intends to provide a draft of the research plan for the Council in December 2011.

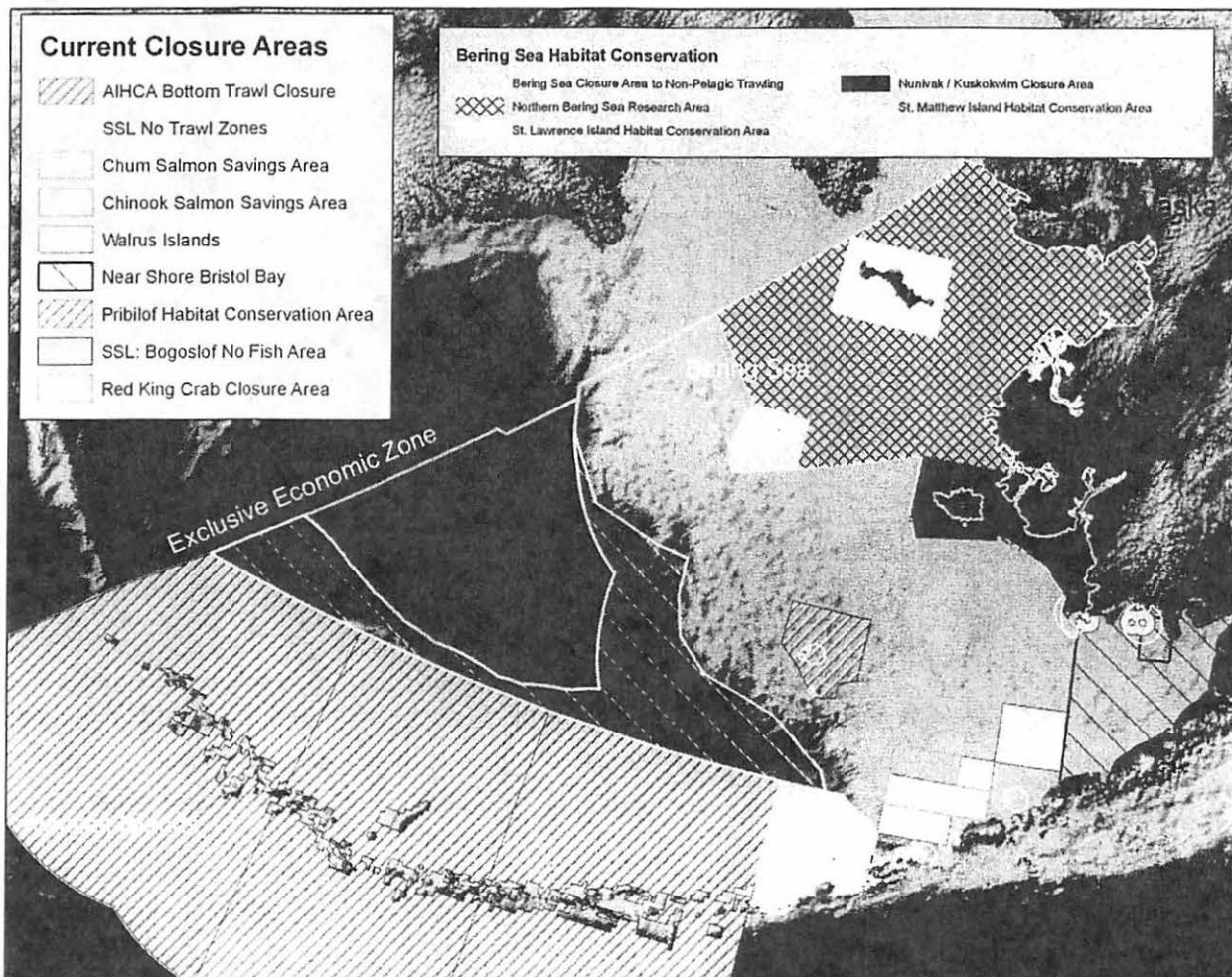
At this meeting, the Council is scheduled to review progress on the development of the Northern Bering Sea research plan and provide feedback to the AFSC. In particular, comments and recommendations are sought from the Council on the outline of research plan, as it will be the framework for realizing the full research plan.

Summary of Amendments 89 and 94 to the BSAI Groundfish FMP: Bering Sea Habitat Conservation Measures

In June 2007, the Council adopted precautionary measures to conserve benthic fish habitat in the Bering Sea by “freezing the footprint” of bottom trawling and limiting trawl effort only to those areas more recently trawled. The measures prohibit bottom trawling in a deep slope and basin area (47,000 nm²) and the Northern Bering Sea Research Area that includes the shelf waters to the north of St. Matthew Island (85,000 nm²).

The entire Northern Bering Sea Research Area is closed to bottom trawling while a research plan is developed. The research plan may include an adaptive management design, which could allow bottom trawling in designated areas to evaluate effects, or research using other experimental fishing approaches. Specific areas within the Northern Bering Sea Research Area, however, will always remain closed to bottom trawling. These Habitat Conservation Areas (HCAs) were established to conserve blue king crab habitat and other essential fish habitat where subsistence harvesting and small-scale local fisheries take place, and include the nearshore areas of Nunivak Island and Kuskokwim Bay, and around St. Lawrence and St. Matthew Islands. The research plan may also identify additional protection measures for blue king and snow crab, marine mammals, ESA-listed species, and subsistence needs for western Alaska communities in nearshore areas.

Bering Sea Habitat Conservation measures, as adopted by the Council and implemented in August 2008.



As a trailing amendment, following the adoption of Amendment 89, the Council adopted restrictions for the Bering Sea flatfish fishery in October 2009, following three years of research by the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, in cooperation with the flatfish industry. Under Amendment 94, any vessel targeting flatfish with nonpelagic trawl gear anywhere in the Bering Sea subarea of the BSAI management area is required to use elevating devices (e.g., discs or bobbins) on their trawl sweeps. The gear modification raises trawl sweeps off the seabed, and protects habitat by reducing damage to seafloor invertebrates, including crab species. The regulations implementing this amendment became effective at the beginning of the 2011 fishing year, in order to provide sufficient time for vessels to make any modifications necessary to comply with the gear requirement.

In addition to the trawl sweep modification, the amendment revised the boundaries of the St Matthew Island HCA and the Northern Bering Sea Research Area, and created a Modified Gear Trawl Zone (MGTZ). The Council moved the eastern boundary of the St Matthew Island HCA in order to provide some additional protection for blue king crab populations that are located to the east of the island. The MGTZ was part of the NBSRA as implemented in 2008, but the NBSRA boundary was revised to exclude this area. In the MGTZ, the use of modified trawl sweeps would be required at all times when using nonpelagic trawl gear, no matter what the target fishery.

Changes to the Bering Sea Habitat Conservation measures, as implemented in 2011 under Amendment 94.

