

**Coast Guard Brief to North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
on Russian Military interactions with U.S. Commercial Fishing Fleet on 26 AUG 2020  
Council Convening 05 OCT 2020**

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**Purpose:** To relate information to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council on the impacts to U.S. fishing vessels from Russian Military Exercise Ocean Shield during the week of 24 August 2020. This brief gives an overview of Ocean Shield, the tactical response to reports of Russia / U.S. Domestic Fishing Fleet engagement, and general information on military exercise communication procedures.

**Scene Setter:** Ocean Shield is a multi-fleet, multi-service Russian military exercise that began in 2018 in the Eastern Mediterranean, and which has significantly expanded in scope with each iteration. Last year it was conducted in the Baltic, and this year expanded into the Bering Sea and the Arctic. The event includes live fire exercises, aircraft sorties, and amphibious landings; it is focused on exercising Russia's capabilities to defend the Far East, Baltic and Arctic regions.

Russia's Arctic Strategy for 2035 features the use of the Northern Sea Route to exploit Arctic resources in the future. Given Russia's economic and security interests in the region, it is likely similar exercises will take place in and near the Arctic in the future. While Russian defense authorities have publicly stated they plan to continue this exercise on an annual basis, it is unknown whether the defense of the Far East will be conducted as part of this exercise series every year.

**Sequence of Events:**

- On 19 August, Russia utilized the HYDROPAC process to provide information on the intended area in which Ocean Shield would occur. The HYDROPAC encompassed an area that included Russian Territorial seas and high seas within the Bering Sea, to include a portion of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) on the high seas.
- On 26 August 2020, Russian naval vessels encountered the U.S. domestic fishing fleet legally fishing in the U.S. EEZ of the Bering Sea. Those U.S. vessels were also within the HYDROPAC area. The Russian naval vessels and aircraft directed those U.S. fishing vessels to depart the area due to safety concerns associated with a missile launch.
  - The Coast Guard received notifications of the encounter from several U.S. fishing vessels through local Command Centers. Reports included information on a surfaced submarine, multiple Russian warships, and a Russian aircraft. It was reported that U.S. fishing vessels were directed over radio transmission, in both Russian and English, to steer a specific course at max speed and depart the area due to a missile exercise.
  - Russian authorities confirmed the submarine OMSK launched a cruise missile from the Bering Sea on 26 August.

### **Coast Guard Response:**

- Shortly after receiving these reports, Coast Guard District 17 exercised communication protocols with the Russian Border Guard, and received verification that the live fire exercise was being conducted within the Russian EEZ. The Russian Border Guard confirmed the presence of an air patrol, which was organized to inform vessels operating near the HYDROPAC area of their proximity to the exercise.
- Coast Guard District 17 also diverted Coast Guard Cutter ALEX HALEY to the location of the U.S. fishing fleet to provide presence, gather first-hand information from the fishing fleet, and educate the fleet on U.S. sovereign rights within the U.S. EEZ.
- Additionally, USCG engaged Department of Defense (DoD), Department of State (DoS) and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to provide tactical information for the diplomatic dialogue.

### **The Way Ahead:**

- Since the incident, District 17 has been engaged with individual fishing industry representatives, including discussion of, and advocacy for, the Fishing Industry's subscription to the NGA's website in order to ensure full dissemination of future HYDRO messages.
  - At this North Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting, District 17 and DoS wish to lead a joint discussion on the incident, as well as provide best practice guidelines on HYDROPAC messages and requirement equipment.
- We are reviewing HYDROPACs, and if one is going to be in our AOR, then we will add that information to the Local Notice to Mariners and Broadcast Notice to Mariners.
- District 17 just completed a contract with the Marine Exchange to use their Automatic Identification System (AIS) system to push marine information to mariners. This contract went into effect on the 30th of September. This contract did not come out of this incident, but we now have a capability transmit information to mariners over AIS systems.
- The Coast Guard will leverage community outreach, engagement, and education in order to highlight available safety information as well as equipment carriage requirements that would ensure receipt of safety notices while underway.
- Ongoing discussions between the Coast Guard, the Coast Guard Attaché in Moscow, State Department liaisons, and Alaska Command are exploring whole of government coordination mechanisms with the goal of an appropriate diplomatic response to the incident. Some of this has already occurred through DoS officials.

- District 17 is also engaged locally with their counterparts at the Russian Border Guard to ensure the safety of fishing vessels in the Bering Sea and surrounding area.

**Closing Points:**

- We applaud the fishing fleet in relaying their concerns of the Russian Military actions to Coast Guard Command Centers as well as their industry leadership, and we hope the increased education and outreach between our two organizations will enhance overall safety and awareness of those that rely on the Bering Sea for their livelihoods.
- While the United States respects the rights of the Russian Navy to conduct exercises in international waters, the U.S. domestic fishing fleet retains the right to legally fish within the boundaries of the U.S. EEZ.
  - The U.S. fishing fleet is not required to depart the legal fishing grounds of the U.S. EEZ if directed to do so by a foreign entity. However, safety of life at sea should always be paramount in managing the safe navigation of any vessel on the high seas, and is the responsibility of the mariner with first hand situational awareness.
  - The responsibility of safety within a military exercise firing zone in international waters and on the high seas belongs to the military service and Nation conducting the exercise.
  - *Essentially, everyone on the high seas has a responsibility to themselves and one another to operate in a safe manner.*