

Executive Director's Report

A Fond Farewell to Judy Willoughby

This evening we will be wishing Judy Willoughby and her husband, Buck, a fond adieu after 112 meetings of the Council. She's been here since they invented fishery management plans and has witnessed the comings and goings of fisheries development through the years. She has sailed through administrative matters and helped us respond successfully to changes in administrations and the complex grant process. She has been a wizard with the budget and has had a hand in almost every aspect of Council operations and contributed substantially to the successful completion of all those meetings. Judy has helped almost everyone in the Council family at one time or another, getting rooms, arranging for meetings, monitoring the flow of testimony, and ensuring that travel claims are handled properly and promptly. She takes with her a wealth of knowledge and Council memory from 17 years of staff employment. I wish her and Buck well as they hit the road for new horizons. Come by to join me in saying good bye at the reception at 6:30 p.m. tonight.

A Final Reminder from Judy

All travel claims from this and any previous meeting should be submitted promptly so we can get your refund in the mail to you as soon as possible.

June 1995 Meeting

We've finalized dates for the June 1995 meeting in Dutch Harbor, so mark your calendars. The AP and SSC will begin on June 12 and the Council begins June 14. This is earlier than we had last planned, but helps us to avoid the salmon season. While on the subject of meetings, our next meeting will begin on January 11 and run for 4-5 days. The AP and SSC will begin on January 9. We have tentatively scheduled our annual joint meeting with the Board of Fisheries for January 10, one day ahead of our own meeting.

Fisheries Information Management System (FIMS)

Steve Davis and LGL Alaska Research Associates will be providing a demonstration of FIMS, their GIS-based information management system. This project was funded by NOAA through its Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant Program and LGL is just wrapping up its first year on the project. Their goal is to develop a relational database/GIS computer system which will allow easier access to fisheries data as well as provide a new way to analyze and present fishery information. A series of posters describing the project will be on display in the AP Meeting Room. An actual working demonstration on a computer will be presented by LGL staff on Thursday, December 8, at 7:00 p.m. The location will be posted on the message board in the hall.

"They Might as well use Dynamite" Revisited

Item B-1(a) has a series of articles and editorials concerning background to the controversial ads taken out in the *NY Times* and their sponsor Fish Forever. The articles allege that Fish Forever is financed by Deep Pacific Fishing Company which is owned by a partnership which includes a major Japanese fishing company, Hamaya Suisan. Evidently Hamaya Suisan owned several of the Japanese Hokuten trawlers that were videotaped illegally fishing in the U.S. EEZ back in 1989. We probably still haven't heard the end of this story.

Groundfish Plan Team Members Need Approval

Bill Aron has nominated Jim Ianelli and Jonathan Heifetz to the Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Plan Team. Both bring a wealth of experience in population dynamics of rockfish and sablefish. The SSC has been asked to review their resumes and provide a recommendation.

Insurance Technical Committee

The Insurance Technical Committee (ITC) appointed by the Council to examine issues surrounding insurance coverages for observers, observer contractors, and vessel owners met on November 4, 1994 in Seattle. A copy of the report from that meeting is included in your notebooks as item B-1(b). The gist of that report is that some type of standardization of insurance requirements is necessary, but not likely to occur before 1996, and will likely require legislative actions at State and Federal levels. Possible solutions are outlined in the report and the Committee will meet once again in early 1995 after staff compiles additional information on these potential long-term solutions. The Committee did form recommendations for insurance coverages during the interim period, which are also included in the report. These recommendations may be utilized by the NMFS Observer Program in their RFP process for the Research (Observer) Plan. Other issues discussed at the meeting are also included in the report. Staff is available to provide additional detail to the Council if necessary.

Endangered Species Designation Possible for Steller Sea Lions

Item B-1(c) is a news release concerning a recent meeting of the Steller Sea Lion Recovery Team. Apparently they are recommending that the Steller Sea Lion be declared endangered under the Endangered Species Act. We don't have a formal report at this time, but possibly NMFS will want to comment on the subject. We hope to have a full report at the January meeting.

David vs. Goliath?

by John van Amerongen

Despite the investigative skills of the TV Crusaders, their October 15 report characterized the social and economic conflict in the North Pacific as "David versus Goliath." What they apparently missed was a big-boat battle of the titans—the Pacific cod allocation war—playing out right under their noses.

Had they focused their investigation on Pacific cod and economic gain, as well as environmental loss, they might have discovered there's more to Fish Forever than Bill Coffey, "who now owns two boats."

The irony is that in addition to being president of Fish Forever, Bill Coffey is also the president of Deep Pacific Fishing Co., a Japanese-financed freezer longline partnership that stands to benefit substantially if codfish quota should spill forth from a politically stricken factory trawler fleet.

Coffey's two boats, the 111-foot *Deep Pacific* and the 141-foot *Lilli Ann* are state-of-the-art freezer longliners controlled by Deep Pacific Fishing Co. a partnership comprised of Maraya Fishing Co.

and Hamaya America. And it's anything but a mom-and-pop Alaska operation.

Hamaya America is a U.S. subsidiary of Hamaya Suisan, a Japanese fishing company with a not-so-environmentally friendly past. Hamaya Suisan owned three of six Hokuten trawlers caught by American Factory Trawler representatives Sam Hjelle and Ted Evans in January of 1988 when AFTA rented a private jet to videotape illegal fishing raids into the U.S. EEZ.

Another trawler owned by Hamaya Suisan, the *Eikyu Maru No. 86*, was one of two trawlers caught by investigative reporters from the Japanese newspaper *Mainichi Shinbun* later in 1988 offloading illegally caught rockfish at a Japanese port.

All four of the Hamaya vessels were judged guilty and sanctioned by the Japanese Fisheries Agency, and the discovery caused the Japanese government and the agency substantial embarrassment at the time and invoked the anger of the North Pacific Fishery Management

Council and Congressional delegations from Washington and Alaska.

Hamaya Suisan also owned longline vessels that fished for Pacific cod within the U.S. EEZ before they were displaced from the U.S. zone—primarily by factory trawlers targeting the same species. One way the company reacquired access to the Bering Sea cod resource was through its subsidiary Hamaya America and Deep Pacific Fishing Co.

Asked about Deep Pacific Fishing Co., Coffey affirmed that 49 percent of the company was owned by Hamaya.

Asked about Fish Forever and its relationship to Deep Pacific Fishing Co., Coffey affirmed that Deep Pacific did "jump-start" the environmental organization. However, he added that since then financial support has been coming in from numerous sources around the country, and the organization has developed a life of its own.

Response from the Crusaders' report has been particularly positive, Coffey said. He added that neither he nor Fish

Forever played a part in the Crusaders' decision to take on the trawl industry. He said he didn't know about the 800 number until the Crusader asked him about it on the pier.

As president of both Deep Pacific and Fish Forever, Coffey said he wears two hats.

"If we're talking about Fish Forever," Coffey said, "I can say that it's about the environment and clean fishing. If you start asking me about when are we getting our main engines rebuilt, that's Deep Pacific."

Coffey said despite its relationship to the longline fishing company, it's unfair to characterize Fish Forever's battle as a battle over North Pacific codfish.

"It's a battle over clean fishing," Coffey said. "It's a campaign to clean up the fisheries. Our campaign started in the North Pacific. Our efforts right now are in the North Pacific, I expect Fish Forever to have a long life. If there's a dirty fishery going on in any part of the world, we would confront that fishery." □

EDITORIALS

The Fish Forever story

THE ads have been in this and other newspapers. "THEY MIGHT AS WELL USE DYNAMITE," shouts the Seattle-based group called Fish Forever. Trouble is, the slogan applies best to the ads' sponsors, a shrill, self-styled environmental group whose palms are greased by fishing interests.

Leaders in the new organization claim they're merely drawing attention to an issue of public policy, the waste of millions of tons of fish and other marine life in the North Pacific fisheries. That's a legitimate issue, one that has been pursued by this newspaper and other critics of North Pacific fisheries.

But Fish Forever serves as a thinly-disguised voice for competing fishing interests who see it to their advantage to oversimplify a complex issue, distort the facts and target their competitors.

According to the ads, the culprits are factory trawlers, "bulldozers of the sea." Trawlers are blamed for everything from short halibut seasons to "rampant waste." Fish Forever criticizes proposed individual quotas as a "monopoly on fishing rights."

In fact, the North Pacific is not being over-exploited. There are problems with the fishery, but overfishing is not one of them.

There is little or no relationship between trawlers and waste. The Seattle-based trawler fleet, which has brought thousands of jobs and billions of dollars into the region's economy, includes some who indulge in wasteful fishing, and others who operate remarkably clean and efficient boats. Donald Bevan, dean emeritus of fisheries at the University of Washington, says most fish is discarded either because there is no market for it, or because federal law requires that it be discarded.

Individual fishing quotas are the management device preferred by most experts and responsible environmental groups such as the Center for Marine Conservation.

Fish Forever, which has spent tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars on ads, is financed by Deep Pacific Fishing Co. The Seattle company operates large fishing vessels that compete with the trawlers for fish. Deep Pacific, in turn, is owned by a partnership of businessman Takujin Kono and by Hamaya Suisan, a major Japanese fishing company.

Hamaya Suisan has a history of illegal poaching in U.S. waters in the Bering Sea, violations investigated and acknowledged by the Japanese government.

What poses as an environmental crusade is a public-relations campaign by private fishing interests who fear proposed reforms.

There is a need for smart, independent voices in the debate over fisheries policy, but Fish Forever is not that voice. The Center for Marine Conservation (1725 DeSales St. N.W., Washington D.C., 20036) is a respected environmental group that does its homework, supports much-needed reforms and is not bankrolled by fishing interests. Environmentalists, or taxpayers, should look to the Center for help in conserving a fragile national resource.

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Wednesday
November 16, 1994
Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Business

Anti-trawling ad is open to interpretation

Attack advertising isn't limited to elections. Ask the factory-trawler owners. Their Seattle fleet has been the target of a series of full-page newspaper ads.

"THEY MIGHT AS WELL USE DYNAMITE,"

screams the headline over a photo of a factory boat (Oceantrawl's Northern Eagle). The subheads cry, "Factory trawlers: Looting the sea" and "The end of fishing in America."

The ad says the Alaska fishing grounds are being ruined by these "bulldozers of the sea." It has run four times in The New York Times, once in The Seattle Times and once in Mother Jones magazine.

The ad is sponsored by Fish Forever, which calls itself "a new national nonprofit organization uniting commercial fishers, conservationists and others concerned about the mismanagement of America's fragile marine environment."

On April 18, when the ad first appeared, Fish Forever was a group that Seattle environmentalists had never heard of. Its Seattle office was no more than one desk, manned by David Allison, a professional green from Washington, D.C., with a reputation as a rhetorical bomb thrower. Allison would not say who paid for the ad.

THE STORY is out now. The ad was paid for by a U.S. affiliate of Hamaya Suisan Co. Ltd. of Japan.

Hamaya Suisan is one of the Japanese fishing companies that was taking the cod and pollock off Alaska before the Magnuson Act established the U.S. 200-mile zone. It was the owner of three of seven boats caught in January 1988 illegally fishing in U.S. waters — caught on videotape by Seattle factory-trawler owner Sam Hjelle.



Bruce Ramsey

Hamaya Suisan's U.S. affiliate is Deep Pacific Fishing Co. of Seattle, which is 50.5 percent owned by Takuji Kono, a naturalized U.S. citizen and corporate secretary of Hamaya America Inc. The other 49.5 percent is owned directly by Hamaya Suisan.

The seed money for the ads came from Deep Pacific. This is a company that runs two Seattle freezer-long-liner boats, the Deep Pacific and the Lili Ann, which catch cod. Federal regulators have split the cod catch — 45 percent for long-liners and others and 55 percent for the trawlers.

Fish Forever, says trawler owner John Bundy, president of Glacier Fish Co., "is a phony environmental group. What this is all about is who's going to get the cod in the Bering Sea."

I TOOK ALL this to Bill Coffey, general manager of Deep Pacific. He's 49, chews snuff and calls himself a fisherman, not a "fisher." "I have never done do-gooding before in my life," he says.

Coffey is head of Fish Forever.

He denies that the organization is about cod allocations or is a front for Japanese fish packers. "I am Fish Forever," he says. "Our aims are to clean up the fisheries. Where the funding comes from has nothing to do with that."

Coffey points to his ad: In the rock-sole fishery, which targets females with eggs, 68 percent of the fish are discarded. That and other trawl fisheries, he says, kill millions of immature crab and halibut. No wonder the crab are almost gone, and the halibut season, as his ad says, "is down to two days a year."

Is the North Pacific really being ruined by trawlers?

"Yes," he insists.

IT IS NOT, says William Aron, director of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle. Pollock, cod and salmon are abundant. So is halibut.

Halibut seasons have shrunk to two days. The reason is the surplus of boats, says Bob Trumble, senior biologist at the International Pacific Halibut Commission in Seattle. The halibut kill by trawlers and others amounts to 27 percent of the total catch — "a serious problem," he says — but if it were reduced to zero, it would give the fleet only 12 more hours of fishing a year.

Bering Sea crab populations have collapsed. Bottom trawling may be a cause. Or it may be the high tide of Pacific cod and Bristol Bay salmon, which eat crab larvae. Biologists aren't sure.

The wasting of fish is mostly a moral issue. Discards of rock sole may be shameful, but biologists say they don't endanger the species. (It is also only 3.75 percent of the factory trawlers' harvest.)

Mark Freeberg, co-owner of Natural Resources Consultants of Seattle, recently finished a global study of fish discards. Trawl gear is not more wasteful than long lines or pots, he says. It all depends on how it's used.

Advertising is something like that, too. Yes, Coffey's ad had some facts in it. It appealed to an admirable sentiment. So did Rep. Maria Cantwell's recent TV ads accusing her opponent, Rick White, of wanting to drill for oil in Puget Sound. That the sponsor comes across in person as the soul of moderation does not make up for a misleading ad.

■ Bruce Ramsey is a P-I business reporter and columnist. His column appears Wednesdays.

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INSURANCE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

November 4, 1994

The Insurance Technical Committee (ITC), appointed by the Council to address insurance issues surrounding the observer program(s), met on November 4, 1994 at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) in Seattle. The following persons were in attendance (asterisk denotes ITC member):

*Jerry Nelson (Chair)	F/V Courageous, F/V Baronoff
*Charles E. Belknap	NOAA-GC NW
*John Boggess	NCCI (National Council on Compensation Insurance)
*Steve Kennebeck	Tyson Seafood Group
*Michael Lake	Alaska Observers (contractor)
*Lisa Lindemann	NOAA-GC Alaska
*Nancy Munro	Saltwater, Inc. (contractor)
*Craig Nodtredt	LeGros Buchanan
*Steve Stafford	Sullivan & Curtis Ins.
*Bruce Thiffault	F.I.S. Insurance
*Lisa VanAtta	Law student
Chris Oliver	NPFMC
Tom Westlake	Observer
Andy Vatter	Observer
Bill Karp	NMFS Observer Program
Martin Loefflad	NMFS Mgmt
Mandy Merklein	Consultant/Observer
Joe Stacey	LeGros Buchanan
Bob Maier	NMFS - Observer Program
Niel Moeller	NOAA-GC Seattle
Brian Gwinn	Frank Orth & Assc.
Deidre Hartferd	Frank Orth & Assc.
Andrew Vatter	Observer
Jas Mangat	NWO, Inc.
Diane Wright	NWO, Inc.

The purpose of the ITC is to address, and to the extent possible, resolve issues of insurance requirements for observers in the groundfish and crab fisheries off Alaska. The desire for standardization of these requirements, along with the need to evaluate a risk-sharing pool to provide the necessary coverage, has prompted the formation of this Committee. The membership of the Committee includes industry representatives, observer contractors,

maritime attorneys, insurance industry representatives and agency legal counsel. A summary of the first meeting of the ITC follows:

CURRENT INSURANCE REQUIREMENTS

After some lengthy discussions by ITC members, the bottom line consensus is that there are currently no specific requirements for insurance coverage, other than perhaps Alaska Workmen's Compensation. For example, certification of observer contractors in this regard only requires that contractors carry 'adequate' insurance coverage for observers. Because of this, and because the jurisdiction under which observers fall has not been defined, many contractors carry a wide array of overlapping, and sometimes redundant, coverage in order to cover any situation. The idea is to protect the needs of the observers themselves, the contractors, and the vessel owners. Under this situation, the coverage packages carried varies across contractors, creating uncertainty, and perhaps inequities, for all parties involved.

There is further uncertainty regarding whether observers are entitled to remedy under Jones Act insurance coverage; i.e., are they covered under the vessel owner's P&I policy which covers other crew members on the vessel, who are employed directly by the vessel owner. There exist conflicting court decisions regarding this issue, which basically boil down to the question, "Are observers considered seamen, and therefore fall under Jones Act protection?" "If so, what are their rights under the vessel's P&I policy as a non-employee?" The employer/employee relationship, or lack thereof, rests at the heart of this issue. This question may ultimately be decided by the courts or by legislation at the federal level, and is considered relevant to future insurance requirements and is discussed below in a separate section.

The ITC noted in its discussions that personal injury and death are not the only instances for which insurance may be a need, but that harassment of observers (physical, sexual, and psychological) is an area where claims are increasing.

Recommendation

The ITC feels that the current situation is not likely to be resolved before 1996, and that true standardization will not be possible until that time. For at least 1995, the ITC feels that a package of coverage should be carried by contractors which covers all possible situations and protects against exposure the three parties involved: observers, contractors, and vessel owners. Such a package would include the following:

- * Maritime Liability to cover 'seamen's' claims under Jones Act and General Maritime Law
 - * U.S.L.&H.
 - * States Worker's Compensation as required
 - * Contractual General Liability
 - * Employee Related Practices
- (\$1 million minimum for Jones Act liability & USL&H)

Preferred additional coverage would include:

- * Personal Property
- * Employee Related Practices
- * Waiver of Subrogation in favor of vessel or plant owner, and Additional Insured status for vessel or plant owners on liability coverage.
- * Hold Harmless wording in favor of vessel or plant owners included in contractual liability coverage.

The ITC feels that identification of the above package may aid NMFS Observer Program in development of the RFP for observer contracting, which they are currently developing, for 1996 and beyond.

RISK-SHARING POOL

Discussion of this issue resulted in perhaps more questions than answers by the ITC. For example, upon close examination of the Magnuson Act language authorizing the Research Plan, it appears that the Act authorizes the evaluation and establishment of a risk-sharing pool only to provide coverage for vessels and owners against liability from civil suits by observers. Under this interpretation, it would not include a pool for other insurance requirements, such as packages carried by contractors currently. An additional fee of up to 2% appears to be authorized to establish the pool to protect vessel owners. Estimates for insurance costs are currently included in the present 2% fee under the Research Plan; it is unclear whether this amount of coverage (currently included in the fee) sufficiently covers vessels and owners against liability from civil suits, so it is also unclear whether an additional coverage pool is necessary for that purpose.

It is possible that a pool could be established within the current 2% fee, which would at least cover the insurance requirements for observer contractors, thereby taking them 'out of the loop' with regard to insurance coverage and establishing a de facto standardization. Because observers will be assigned to vessels/contractors under the Research Plan, some form of standardization and certainty is required. One possibility is that, when contractors submit bids to NMFS under the RFP process for the Research Plan, they could exclude insurance costs from their bids, thereby removing the 'middleman' from the process, and allow NMFS to purchase the appropriate insurance package in a poll scenario.

Recommendation

No specific recommendation is offered at this time, pending clarification of potential, comprehensive insurance requirements, except that the ITC requests examination by NOAA GC, and clarification of the intent of the current wording of the Magnuson Act with regard to the risk-sharing pool language.

FUTURE SOLUTIONS

As discussed earlier, we basically stuck with the current situation until at least 1996. The ITC discussed potential ideal scenarios with regard to standardization, with the primary intent being the development of a single coverage package which would cover all three of the jurisdictional avenues (Worker's Comp, USL&H, Maritime). The ITC believes that simplifying the jurisdictions would be an improvement and would lower the cost of insurance. This may require federal and/or state legislation. Four possibilities are discussed below.

It was offered that, since Alaska Worker's Comp is required for all observers, and since nearly all claims in the past have been handled through Alaska Worker's Comp, then this should be the 'one' insurance requirement to cover observer needs (some members question whether the requirement for Alaska Worker's Comp is valid for observers outside the three-mile limit). However, this may not cover the needs of vessel owners, for example, in terms of their potential liability for large claims under Jones Act.

Alternately, it was suggested that a remedy would be to clarify seamen status for observers, through Magnuson Act reauthorization if necessary, which would entitle them to Jones Act coverage. It was noted however that such designation may not be the best deal for observers, because there are many benefits offered through worker's comp, and other packages, that are not covered under the Jones Act avenue. Crewmen, for example, though covered under Jones Act, are not covered under the worker's comp benefits which observers receive. It becomes a tradeoff really, between guaranteed coverage of a myriad of situations (with limits) and a more open-ended coverage (in terms of monetary compensation) but with stricter limitations on what is covered. Generally, people

would be better off with Jones Act coverage only if: (1) there is major injury or death involved, and/or (2) there is 'provable' fault or negligence.

Two other packages were identified by the ITC as having the potential to provide the necessary coverage in a single-source package. One is the FECA (Federal Employees Compensation Act) which covers all federal employees. The ITC discussed the fact that observers could be federal employees under the Research Plan, but are not treated as such by the agency for a variety of reasons. In essence, they feel that the contracting process is more appropriate and provides observers with a better overall employment environment. FECA is still a potential avenue of coverage however.

The other avenue identified is the Longshore and Harborworkers' Compensation Act. As with the other potential sources identified above, there are a series of questions which need to be answered before the ITC can come to a specific recommendation. Each of the above approaches will require changes to legislation at the State and Federal level. The level and extent of these changes is uncertain at this time. There is also uncertainty regarding the specific coverage and jurisdictions provided by each of these packages.

Recommendation

The ITC reserves recommendation on this aspect of the insurance issue until further information is developed by staff and NOAA GC regarding: (1) the specific coverage which would be provided under each package, and (2) the necessary regulatory and/or legislative changes which would be required for each. The ITC is unanimous that we need some certainty on this issue, regardless of the eventual package utilized, and that simplification of the jurisdictions involved would be an improvement over the present situation.

The Committee will meet again in early 1995 to review the information compiled by staff and NOAA GC, and attempt to make a recommendation on this issue.

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 2, 1994

Endangered label could close fisheries to protect sea lions

By **CRAIG MEDRED**
Daily News reporter

Unsure of exactly what to do, but convinced that something must be done to save the disappearing Steller sea lions of the western North Pacific Ocean, a team of scientists on Wednesday recommended the species be declared endangered.

Such a declaration — if adopted by the National Marine Fisheries Service — could force some closures in multimillion-dollar Alaska fisheries for pollock and other groundfish.

"We're certainly not at the point of point of saying, 'Yes, we're going to close fisheries,'" Sue Mello of the NMFS said Thursday. "(But) I think the fishermen



ANNE RAUP / Daily News file photo

This Steller sea lion was photographed in the Aleutians last summer.

Please see Back Page, **SEA LIONS**

SEA LIONS:

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are going to be really scared."

Catches of 4 billion pounds of groundfish each year fuel a \$1 billion fishery off the coast of Alaska. Scientists have concluded those fisheries may be taking pollock and other fish vital to the survival of young sea lions.

Since 1960, the sea lion population in the western North Pacific has fallen from an estimated 140,000 animals to 25,000. Scientists do not know for sure what has caused the population to collapse, but they suspect fishing may have contributed to the decline. They closed trawl zones around rookeries after a 1990 designation of the Steller as a threatened species, said Lloyd Lowry, an Alaska Department of Fish and Game biologist who chairs the Steller sea lion recovery team for the NMFS. Clearly, he said, something more needs to be done.

Recovery team members on Wednesday discussed not only expanding restrictions around rookeries to 10 miles, but identifying winter and summer feeding areas and closing fishing there. It might also be necessary to close some herring, and possibly salmon areas, they said.

Walleye pollock and squid are the most important foods in the diets of adult sea lions, according to new studies, but Pacific herring, capelin, Pacific cod, salmon, flatfish and

Fisheries could be closed to save them

Any link between starving sea lions and fishing in the North Pacific and Bering Sea is far from proved, but there is some evidence to support the theory.

octopus can also provide important seasonal prey of the 400 to 1,200-pound marine mammals.

After years of study, scientists believe they have narrowed the problem to the loss of young animals in the nearshore environment.

Adult sea lions seem to do fine, Lowry said. Reproductive success appears normal. Pups are healthy. There are no signs of deaths from biological or chemical poisons in the environment. But sometimes after the pups leave their parents, they disappear, never to be seen again.

Most likely, the recovery panel concluded Wednesday after two days of discussion, the young sea lions — which can't dive as deep or swim as fast as adults — are starving.

"Everything points in that direction," Lowry said. "It could be predators. It could be killer whales eating those pups. It could be something else... (but) it looks like nutrition."

Any link between starving sea lions and fishing in the North Pacific and Bering Sea is far from proved, but there is some evi-

dence to support the theory.

"Walleye pollock have been shown to be an important prey of Steller sea lions in the Gulf of Alaska, Bering Sea and North Pacific Ocean," notes a federal sea lion recovery plan. "Commercial fisheries, which target on several of the most important prey species of Steller sea lions, including pollock, remove millions of metric tons of fish, much of which is potential sea lion food."

Recovery team members on Wednesday discussed the issue of closing important fisheries without a proveable, cause-and-affect relationship between the sea lion decline and commercial bottomfish catches, but finally decided they had to tell the NMFS to act.

"What this (recommendation) would do is give the National Marine Fisheries Service a little more horsepower to do the really controversial things," said Don Calkins, a marine mammal biologist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and a member of the panel. "You need to close broad areas to all fishing and see if that affects the sea lion population."

Before that happens, however, the NMFS must accept the recovery team's recommendation. That is not a given, Mello said, although she noted the federal agency has been studying some of the protective ideas the team suggested.

"We were already in that process," she said. "We're not very far along in that process."

She doesn't expect any proposals for fishing closures to surface until next spring, and then there will be a full range of public hearings before any action is taken.

Recovery team members on Wednesday said the NMFS should tread carefully. It would make little sense to ban fishing around sea lion rookeries at times when sea lions weren't there, team members agreed. Likewise, they said, it would be senseless to ban fishing for species, such as crab, that are not prey for sea lions.

The recovery team also decided sea lions in the eastern portion of the North Pacific are in good shape. Genetic studies done by Tom Loughlin of NMFS have concluded that population — from Prince William Sound east and south to California — is genetically distinct from the population that ranges west from the sound.

The recovery team suggested that NMFS study the possibility of removing the eastern stock from its threatened listing under the Endangered Species Act.