



IN REPLY REFER TO:

United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

1011 E. Tudor Road
Anchorage, Alaska 99503-6199



FWS/AFES

Agenda Item B-6: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report
December 8, 2010

Northern Sea Otter

On October 12, 2010, the Service released the Notice of Availability for the Draft Recovery Plan for the Southwest Alaska Distinct Population Segment (DPS). The recovery plan describes the status, current management, recovery objectives and criteria, and specific actions needed to enable us to delist the southwest Alaska DPS. We request review and comment on our plan from local, State, and Federal agencies and the public. We will also accept any new information on the species' status throughout its range. The public comment period will run through February 9, 2011 (120 days). The Federal Register Notice, Draft Recovery Plan, and related information can be found at: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/seaotters/recovery.htm>.

Pacific Walrus

To assist the Council in its proposed action to establish a federal walrus protection closure area at Hagemeister Island, the Service has been in communication with representatives of the yellowfin sole catcher processor fleet (Alaska Seafood Cooperative and Fisherman's Finest) and other parties. Our goal is to identify walrus protection area boundaries that would effectively reduce the potential for disturbance from federally permitted fishing vessels while allowing a safe and practical transit route for said vessels to reach the off-load sites on the west side of Hagemeister Island and in Togiak Bay. Initial review of this closure proposal is slated as agenda item D-1(c) at the December 2010 meeting of the Council.

Salmon Bycatch

Chinook: The Service, as a member of the Federal Subsistence Board (FSB), is concerned with incidental harvest of Alaska-origin salmon. We are aware that the NPFMC is currently evaluating Chinook salmon bycatch in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) groundfish trawl fisheries. Chinook salmon are taken regularly from the start of the trawl fisheries on January 20th through early April, and also during June/July and September/October in the pollock fishery. Our staff regularly participates in these deliberations (for example, the April 2010 review of the draft discussion paper, http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/current_issues/bycatch/GOAchinookbycatch410.pdf) and will attend that portion of the December meeting when GOA salmon bycatch is addressed.

Chum: Though chum salmon bycatch in the BSAI is not on the agenda for the December meeting of the Council, the Service and FSB continue to monitor efforts to reduce bycatch



(http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/npfmc/current_issues/bycatch/Chumbycatchmotion610.pdf). This issue is important to the Bristol Bay, Seward Peninsula, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Western Interior and Eastern Interior Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils. We are aware of the following events and/or actions scheduled to be taken by the NPFMC:

- January 2011: Review of preliminary data/analysis.
- February-March 2011: Members and/or staff plan to attend four Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council meetings, give presentations on the proposed chum salmon bycatch management measures and solicit public comments.
- June 2011: In Nome; selection of the preliminary preferred alternative.
- October 2011 (tentative): In Anchorage; final action on preferred alternative, which will be provided to the Secretary of Commerce. Rule making process will follow.

In summary, the Service and FSB will continue to monitor these salmon bycatch issues and provide further comments and recommendations, as warranted.

ESA-listed Seabirds (*Short-tailed albatross, spectacled eider, Steller's eider*)

No new information to report.

Migration and wintering of yellow-billed loons near the Kodiak Archipelago

(abstracted from materials provided by USGS Alaska Science Center)

The yellow-billed loon is a Candidate Species for listing under the Endangered Species Act and has been the subject of ongoing research by personnel from the USGS Alaska Science Center (ASC). Over the past decade, ASC staff have been attaching satellite transmitters to breeding yellow-billed loons (*Gavia adamsii*) to document population-specific links to migration and wintering areas. Recent findings indicate that a small number of yellow-billed loons marked at Daring Lake (Canada) are now wintering off the southwest end of the Kodiak Archipelago, around Tugidak Island at distances of 8 to 40 km offshore (see graphic below). The loons arrived near Tugidak Island between 14 and 29 October and are expected to continue residing at the southern end of this archipelago until May. For more information, contact Joel Schmutz, USGS/ASC, at: jschmutz@usgs.gov or 907-786-7186.

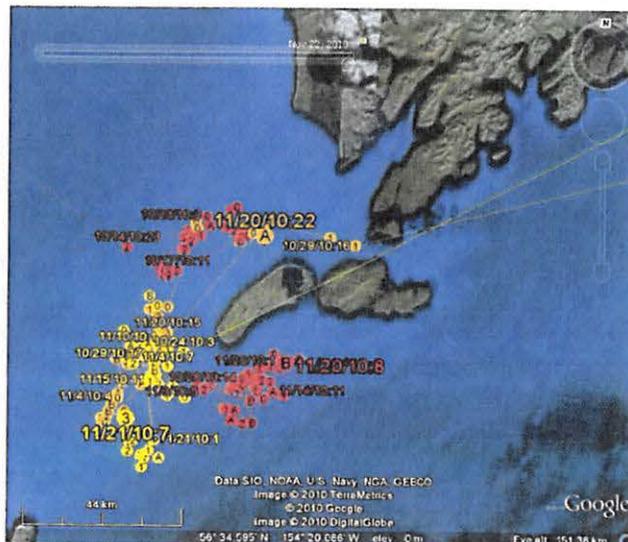
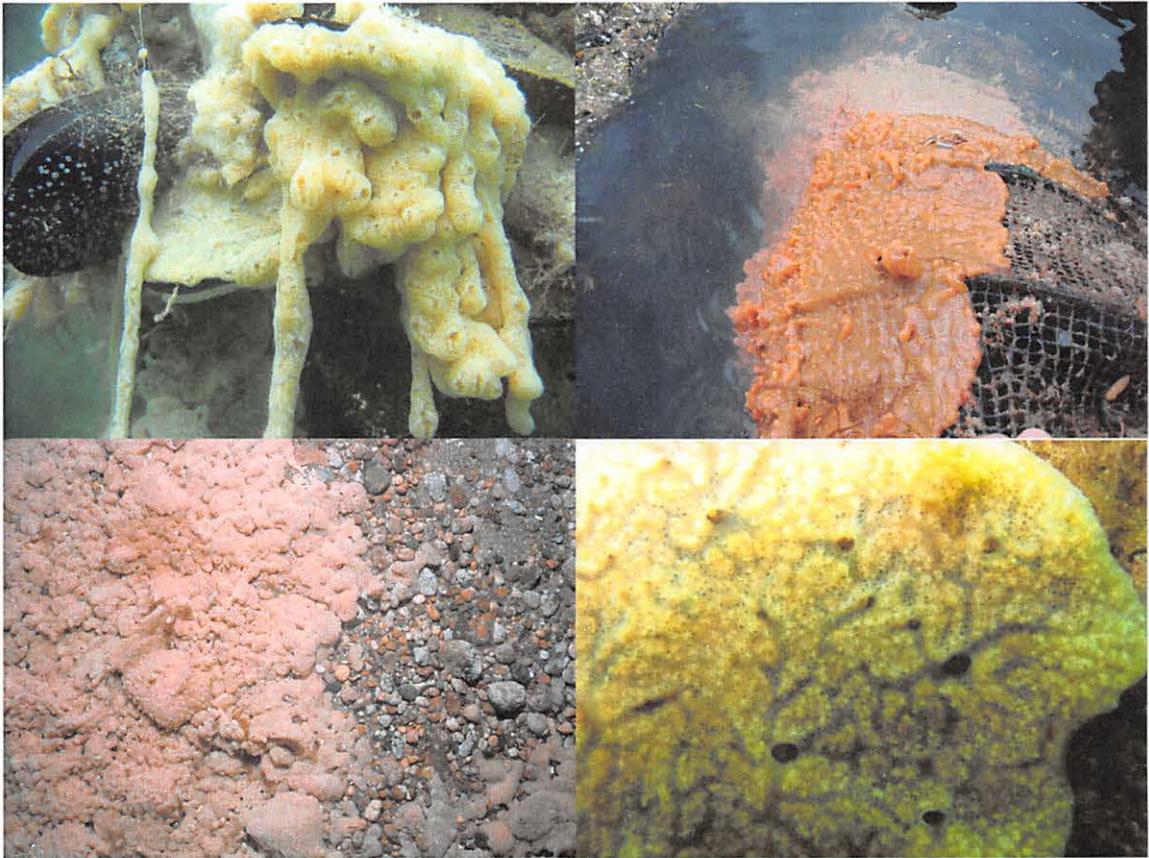


Figure 1. Three yellow-billed loons – 1 per color.

New Invasive Species Alert!

Didemnum vexillum (aka "Marine Vomit") Invades Alaska



- This highly invasive tunicate is now confirmed to have invaded coastal waters near Sitka.
- Despite its comical name ("marine vomit"), this invasion is no laughing matter. *Didemnum* was confirmed from Georges Bank (off the New England Coast) in 2003 when it covered "just" 6 mi² but has already spread to over 88 mi² of gravel substrate that had been historically important to the survival and success of Atlantic cod and haddock and important to settlement of sea scallops.
- *Didemnum* can be spread with boat hulls, anchors, fishing gear, and aquaculture equipment or products (e.g., docks, rafts, shellfish stock) if such gear is not cleaned when moved from the area.
- *Didemnum* can impact species diversity and abundance, alter habitat structure, and limit access to benthic food resources. In Alaska, this means direct impacts to aquaculture, and, if it spreads beyond the invasion site (as it may very well if we do not immediately invest in containment), could impact food availability to marine mammals, commercial fishery species, and other benthic feeders.
- With some initial funding from USFWS, a partnership has formed to assess the invasion site, risks of spread, and eradication options. Involved parties include ADFG, NOAA, Sitka Tribe of Alaska, Sitka Sound Science Center, Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Tiburon Marine Lab, City of Sitka, and others. Each partner has committed to working on a response -- some with time, labor and local knowledge, others potentially with technical equipment (e.g., ROVs), but all with a driving interest in the elimination or minimization of the ecological and economic risks of this invasion.

If you find this species, report it to Alaska Department of Fish and Game at:

1- 877-INVASIV

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council, SSC and AP Members
FROM: Chris Oliver *DO for*
Executive Director
DATE: November 29, 2010
SUBJECT: Protected Resources Report

ESTIMATED TIME
4 HOURS

ACTION REQUIRED

Receive report on Protected Resources issues and take action as necessary.

BACKGROUND

A. Pacific Walrus

Final results from the 2006 range wide population survey of Pacific walrus were published in October 2010 (Speckman et al. 2010). This is the first range wide survey of Pacific walrus conducted since 1990. The minimum population estimate from the survey is 129,000. This includes a correction factor to account for animals that were in the water during the survey, and were not counted as hauled out on ice. The 95% confidence interval around this estimate is quite large (55,000 to 507,000 individuals). These data were not corrected for areas not surveyed due to poor weather conditions (about half the available walrus habitat). Because survey methods have changed, the 2006 estimate is not directly comparable to the last range-wide survey conducted in 1990, which estimated more than 200,000 walrus.

On September 10, 2010, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced that the deadline for the 12-month finding on whether to list Pacific walrus as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act has been extended until January 31, 2011.

At its December 2010 meeting, the Council is scheduled to make an initial review of a proposal to establish a closure area around a newly-emerging walrus haulout on Hagemeister Island in northern Bristol Bay. The intent of establishing the closure is to minimize disturbance by vessel traffic to walrus using the haulout. The closure could potentially restrict federally-permitted vessels from transiting or fishing in the waters adjacent to the haulout, which is located on the southwest side of Hagemeister Island. A vessel transit corridor would allow vessels to continue to travel on the west side of the island at some prescribed distance from the haulout.

B. Cook Inlet Beluga Whales

In 2010 NMFS estimated the Cook Inlet beluga whale population to be 340 individuals, up from the 2009 estimate of 321 whales, although the 10 year annual trend is still declining 1.1% per year. The results are based on aerial surveys conducted in early June during fish migrations, when belugas concentrate near river mouths. All of Cook Inlet was surveyed in 2010, but the survey focused on areas in upper Cook Inlet where all of the whales counted in recent years have been found. A summary of the 2010 survey, as

well as population estimates from surveys conducted since 2001, is attached as Item B-7(b). The final Cook Inlet beluga whale critical habitat determination is expected to be published before the end of the year. The proposal designates more than one-third of Cook Inlet as critical habitat for belugas.

C. Ice Seals

There are four species of ice seals in the North Pacific: spotted, bearded, ringed, and ribbon seals. All four species of seals have been petitioned for listing under the ESA. The National Marine Fisheries Service announced on October 21, 2010 that it has listed the southern distinct population (DPS) of the spotted seal as threatened under the ESA (see Item B-7(c)). The southern DPS consists of an estimated 3,300 seals, and is found in China and Russia. Because this population occurs in areas outside of the U.S., no critical habitat will be designated as part of this action. A year ago, NMFS determined that listing the two other spotted seal populations which occur in the U.S., Russia, and Japan, was not warranted.

NMFS is expected to release the 12 month findings on the petitions to list ringed and bearded seals on or about December 3, 2010. There will be a 60 day public comment period on these findings. The status review for spotted, ringed, and bearded seals was initiated in May 2008 in response to a petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity to list these species as threatened or endangered under the ESA. NMFS completed its status review of the ribbon seal in December 2008, and determined that listing of the ribbon seal was not warranted.

D. Eastern DPS Steller Sea Lions

NMFS is expected to release its 90 day finding in response to the petitions to delist the eastern DPS of Steller sea lions in early December. The finding will make the determination as to whether the petition presents substantial information indicating that delisting may be warranted. In addition, the finding will include a solicitation of information to help NMFS determine whether the petition is warranted. NMFS would make any delisting determination in the 12 month finding. NMFS received a petition to delist the eastern DPS from 3 states: Alaska, Oregon, and Washington.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Regional Office

NOAA Fisheries News Releases

NEWS RELEASE

October 8, 2010

Julie Speegle, 907-586-7032

COOK INLET BELUGA POPULATION UP SINCE 2009; OVERALL TREND STILL DOWNWARDS

Anchorage, AK — Scientists from NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service have estimated the Cook Inlet beluga whale population to be 340 animals. This is up from the 2009 figure of 321.

The results are based on aerial surveys conducted in early June during fish migrations, when belugas concentrate near river mouths. NOAA's Fisheries Service scientists surveyed the entire Cook Inlet, with several days spent focusing on upper Cook Inlet where all of the whales have been found in recent years. The scientists manually count the belugas while collecting video of the groups of whales. Those video sequences and observer counts were later analyzed to obtain an estimate of the total number of beluga whales in the inlet.

The Cook Inlet beluga whale was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 2008. Although the population estimate saw a slight increase this year, analysis over the past decade shows a gradual downward population trend of 1.1% annually.

The Cook Inlet beluga population estimates for each of the past 10 years are:

2001: 386
2002: 313
2003: 357
2004: 366
2005: 278
2006: 302
2007: 375
2008: 375
2009: 321
2010: 340

Fisheries scientists also conducted aerial surveys in August to count calves and estimate the calving rate of this population. Results from the August surveys are expected in December.

Cook Inlet belugas are one of five beluga populations recognized within U.S. waters. The others are Bristol Bay, eastern Bering Sea, eastern Chukchi Sea and Beaufort Sea.

For more information, contact Rod Hobbs at 206-526-6278.

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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Regional Office

NOAA Fisheries News Releases

NEWS RELEASE

October 21, 2010

Julie Speegle, 907-586-7032

NOAA LISTS POPULATION OF SPOTTED SEALS AS THREATENED

NOAA today listed the southern distinct population segment (DPS) of the spotted seal as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, strictly regulating importation of the animal or its parts into the U.S.

The southern DPS of about 3,300 spotted seals is centered in Liaodong Bay, China, and Peter the Great Bay, Russia. Because the known distribution of the southern DPS occurs in areas outside the jurisdiction of the United States, no critical habitat can be designated as part of the listing action.

Under the ESA, NOAA can list a population outside the U.S., and regulate its importation into the U.S. American fishermen would also be prohibited from taking the animal.

Climate change and sea ice decline is expected to affect the sea ice habitat of these spotted seals, which use the sea ice formed each year for reproduction and molting in the spring. During the summer months they can be found in the open ocean or hauled out on shore. In the southern DPS, spotted seals have shown some capability to reproduce and molt on shore when ice is not available. However, suitable sites such as offshore rocks and isolated island beaches are limited, and may expose seals to increased predation and human disturbance.

Because of the small number of these seals and their vulnerability to the potential lack of ice, as well as other risks such as incidental fishery takes and possible oil spills, NOAA concluded that this population segment qualifies as threatened under the ESA. This designation means that this population is likely to become in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future.

The listing comes a year after NOAA did not list two other northern spotted seal populations in Russian, Japanese, and U.S. waters under the ESA. The two northern populations are large, have many offspring, and have a broad distribution, lessening their need for ESA protection.

NOAA's Fisheries Service examined the best scientific and commercial data available in its determination to list the southern segment of the spotted seal as threatened. After completing the status review in October 2009, the public had an opportunity to comment on the proposal to list the species during a 60-day comment period. Nine comments were received. NOAA also initiated an independent peer review of the proposed listing determination. The agency fully considered all comments received from the public and peer reviewers in developing this final rule.

This rule will become effective 30 days after date of publication in the Federal Register. The final rule, status review, and other supporting materials can be found on our web site at:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice.htm>.



Spotted seal. Photo: NOAA Fisheries

December 2, 2010

International Pacific Halibut Commission Staff Preliminary Catch Limit Recommendations: 2011

In making catch limit recommendations for 2011, staff has considered the results of the 2010 stock assessment, changes in the commercial and survey indices used to monitor the stock, and a harvest policy that reflects coastwide policy goals.

Coastwide commercial fishery weight per unit effort (WPUE) decreased by approximately 6% in 2010 from 2009 values, primarily due to declines ranging from 6-24% in the central and western portions of the stock (Areas 3A to 4). In contrast, commercial WPUE increased substantially in Areas 2A and 2B, and modestly in Area 2C. However, the 2010 IPHC stock assessment survey WPUE values increased only in Areas 2A (109%) and 2B (3%) while decreasing from 5-36% in Areas 2C to 4. The coastwide survey index of abundance declined by approximately 15% from 2009 to 2010.

The staff conducted several analyses in 2010 that have been incorporated into the staff's catch limit recommendations. These included the addition of new Bering Sea survey data into estimation of exploitable biomass, and a statistical analysis resulting in an improved averaging procedure for the survey WPUE data used in apportioning the coastwide biomass estimate into regulatory area biomass estimates. At the request of the Commission, the staff also developed a procedure to directly deduct removals of halibut between 26-32 inches from available yield, in the area of occurrence.

The staff and the Commission have also been concerned that the Commission's Slow Up – Fast Down (SUFDF) harvest policy adjustments have not achieved target harvest rate goals in the face of continued stock declines, decreases in halibut growth rate, and the history of high exploitation rates for some areas in recent years. The staff therefore recommends that the SUFDF policy be modified to a Slow Up – Full Down (SUFULLD) policy, to achieve the necessary reductions in harvest rate and promote increases in exploitable biomass. That is, staff recommendations would incorporate the existing policy of a 33% increase from previous year's catch limits when stock yields are projected to increase but use a 100% decrease in recommended catch, when stock yields are projected to decrease.

Catch Limit Recommendations for 2011

The 2010 stock assessment resulted in a coastwide estimate for the 2011 Fishery Constant Exploitation Yield (FCEY) of 41.89 Mlb, a decline of approximately 6% from the 2010 value of 44.40 Mlb. While FCEY values increased in Areas 2A and 2B, these increases were offset by decreased values for Areas 2C and 3. The 2011 FCEY values for the combined subareas of Area 4 remained largely unchanged. For 2011, the staff has evaluated potential adjustments to the apportionment procedure for the coastwide exploitable biomass. Of the adjustments considered, the staff recommends continued use of the hook competition and survey timing factors. In addition, analysis supports the use of reverse-weighted average survey WPUE as the most appropriate averaging method, which places much higher emphasis on the most recent year's survey WPUE than on those of previous years. For all areas, direct deductions for all bycatch and wastage mortality between 26-32 inches are made in the area of occurrence to determine the FCEY. Previously, the deductions for this mortality were included in calculation of the target harvest rate.

The largest changes in recommended 2011 Catch Limits occur in Areas 2C and 3. For Area 2C the difference in the catch limit recommendation between 2010 and 2011 is primarily the result of the application of the SUFullID harvest adjustment. For Area 3, the primary cause of the change in recommendations between 2010 and 2011 is the estimated decline in exploitable biomass.

The staff recommended Catch Limits totaling 41.02 million pounds for 2011, a decrease of approximately 19% from 2010 Adopted Catch Limits, are presented in Table 1. The Area 2A recommendation includes all removals (commercial, treaty Tribes, and sport) allocated by the Pacific Fishery Management Council's Catch Sharing Plan. Area 4CDE is treated as a single regulatory unit by the Commission, although the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Catch Sharing Plan allocates the Commission catch limit into limits for the individual regulatory areas. The Area 2B catch limit recommendation includes totals for the commercial and sport fisheries. The Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans will allocate the adopted catch limit between the sport and commercial fisheries.

For Areas 2C and 3A the catch limit recommendation includes the use of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) authorized Guideline Harvest Levels (GHL) for the halibut recreational charter fisheries of 0.788 Mlb and 3.650 Mlb, respectively, as the projected removals by that sector for 2011. The catch limit recommendations are made with the assumption that both Canada and the U.S. will manage to their domestic targets for sport fish.

These recommendations, along with public and industry views on them, will be considered by IPHC Commissioners and their advisors at the IPHC Annual Meeting in Victoria BC, Canada, during January 25-28, 2011. These recommendations are preliminary and, as final data are included in the assessment, may be updated for the Annual Meeting but are not expected to change significantly.

Proposals concerning changes to catch limits should be submitted to the Commission by December 31, 2010. Catch limit proposals are available on the Commission's webpage (<http://www.iphc.int/meetings-and-events/annual-meeting/catch-limit-comments.html>) or from the Commission's office. Additional details about the Annual Meeting can also be found on the web page.

Table 1. IPHC staff recommended catch limits for 2011, by IPHC regulatory area (million lbs, net weight). The 2010 fishery catch limits are included for comparison.

Regulatory Area	2010 Adopted Fishery Catch Limit	2011 IPHC Staff Recommended Fishery Catch Limit
2A ^a	0.81	0.86
2B ^b	7.50	7.65
2C	4.40	2.33
3A	19.99	14.36
3B	9.90	7.52
4A	2.33	2.41
4B	2.16	2.18
4CDE ^c	3.58	3.72
Total	50.67	41.02

^a Includes sport, tribal, and commercial fisheries.

^b Includes sport and commercial fisheries.

^c Individual catch limits for Areas 4C, 4D, and 4E are determined by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council catch sharing plan.

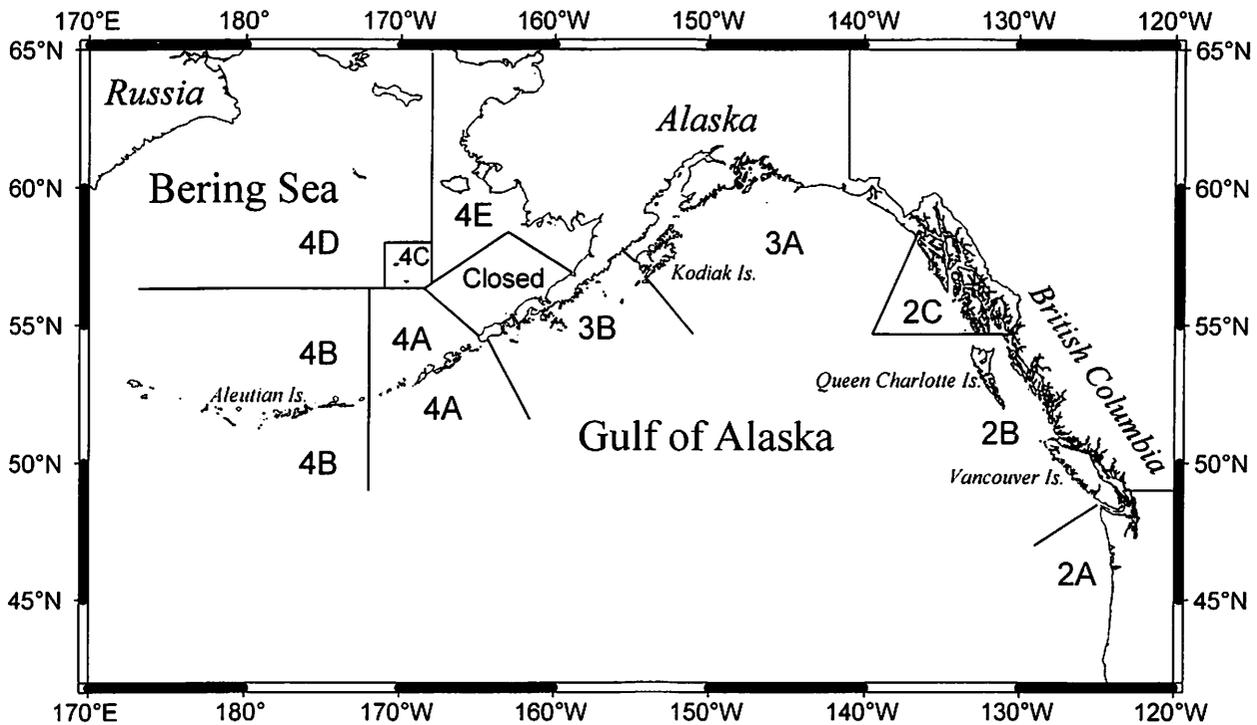


Figure 1. International Pacific Halibut Commission Regulatory Areas.