



Environmental Impact Statement on Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research

Public Scoping Meeting

Anchorage, AK

January 23, 2006



Office of Protected Resources



NOAA Fisheries

National Marine Fisheries Service





Welcome and Introduction



**Moderator:
Jon Isaacs, URS**





Scoping Meeting Agenda

- **Information on Scoping Process**
- **Background on NEPA Process**
- **Overview of Steller Sea Lion & Northern Fur Seal Population Status**
- **Overview of current research**
- **Review of Proposed Action and Purpose and Need**
- **Public comment period**
 - Research needs and techniques, Alternatives, and environmental considerations to be addressed





Scoping Meeting Locations

- January 18 – Silver Spring, Maryland
- January 20 – Seattle, Washington
- January 23 – Anchorage, Alaska





Scoping Meeting Procedures

- **Please Sign in at the Registration Table to Present Oral Comments**
- **Written Comments may be Turned in Today**
- **Transcripts of Today's Meeting are being Captured by a Court Reporter, as well as Audio Taped**





The NEPA Process

Steve Leathery

Chief

Permits, Conservation, and Education Division

Office of Protected Resources

National Marine Fisheries Service

Silver Spring, MD





Purpose of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

- Encourage harmony between man and environment
- Promote efforts to prevent or eliminate damage to environment
- Enrich understanding of ecological systems and natural resources





Requirements of NEPA

- Assess potential environmental impacts of proposed federal agency actions
- Consider environmental consequences early in decision-making to reduce, prevent, or eliminate environmental damage
- Seek out public comments on issues and alternatives to be addressed during scoping

NEPA DOES NOT: Dictate the decision to be made by NMFS.





What is the Federal Action?

As the agency responsible for management of Steller sea lions and northern fur seals under the ESA and MMPA:

NMFS administers **grants** and issues **permits** to conduct research on Steller sea lions and northern fur seals





Why an Environmental Impact Statement?

NOAA policy (NAO 216-6) to prepare an EIS for agency actions that:

- are the subject of significant public controversy based on potential environmental consequences
- have uncertain environmental impacts or risks
- establish a precedent or decision in principle about future proposals
- may result in cumulatively significant impacts
- may have adverse effects upon endangered or threatened species or their habitats





What is included in an Environmental Impact Statement?

- Purpose and need for proposed action
- Reasonable range of alternatives that meet project purpose and need
- Description of affected environment
- Analysis of environmental consequences of alternatives

The EIS will consist of a programmatic analysis, covering current and projected federally granted and permitted research projects





Environmental Factors Typically Considered in an EIS

- **Wildlife**
 - Threatened & Endangered Species
 - Marine Mammals & Seabirds
 - Other marine & terrestrial species
- **Unique Geographic Areas**
 - National Marine Sanctuaries
 - National Wildlife Refuges
 - Designated Critical Habitat
 - Essential Fish Habitat
- **Socioeconomics**
 - Coastal and Subsistence Communities
 - Cultural & Historical Resources
- **Cumulative Impacts**
 - Past, present, reasonably foreseeable future
 - Short & long-term
 - Direct & indirect



Slide 12

CWH1

Please redo this list to match the fact sheet. Also, critical habitat was omitted from the list.

CHubard, 10/31/2005



Next Steps in the EIS Process

- Review and analyze scoping comments
- Conduct workshop on research needs and methods
- Prepare and release Draft EIS
 - **Identify reasonable range of alternatives to be considered in EIS (that meet Purpose and Need)**
 - **Describe the environment affected by proposed action**
 - **Evaluate the environmental consequences of proposed action and alternatives**
- Public comment period for Draft EIS
- Prepare Final EIS
 - Estimated completion in Fall 2007





Steller Sea Lion & Northern Fur Seal Research Proposed Action and Alternatives



Tammy Adams
NMFS



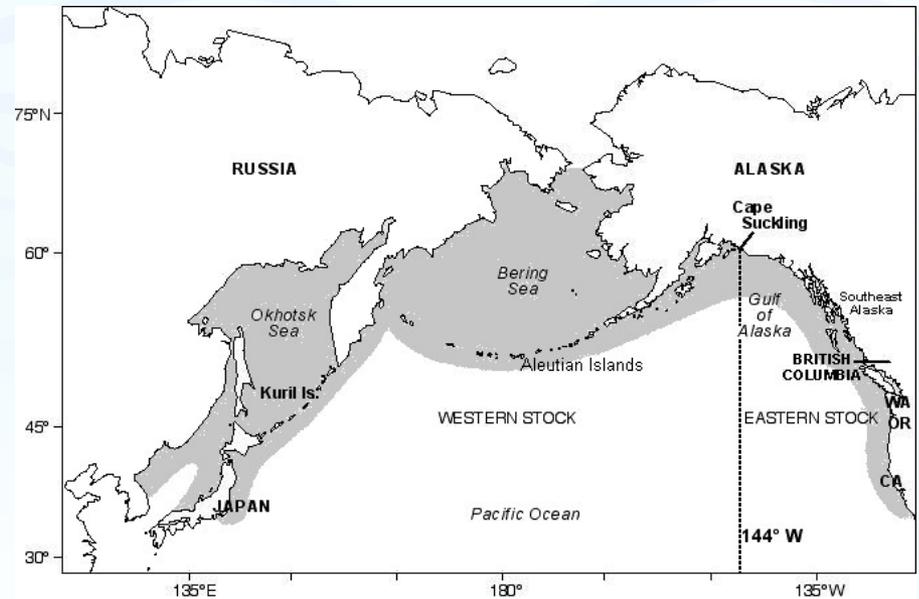


Steller Sea Lion Management Status

1990: Listed range-wide as "threatened" under ESA

1997: Two distinct populations recognized

- Western listed as "endangered"
- Eastern listed as "threatened"

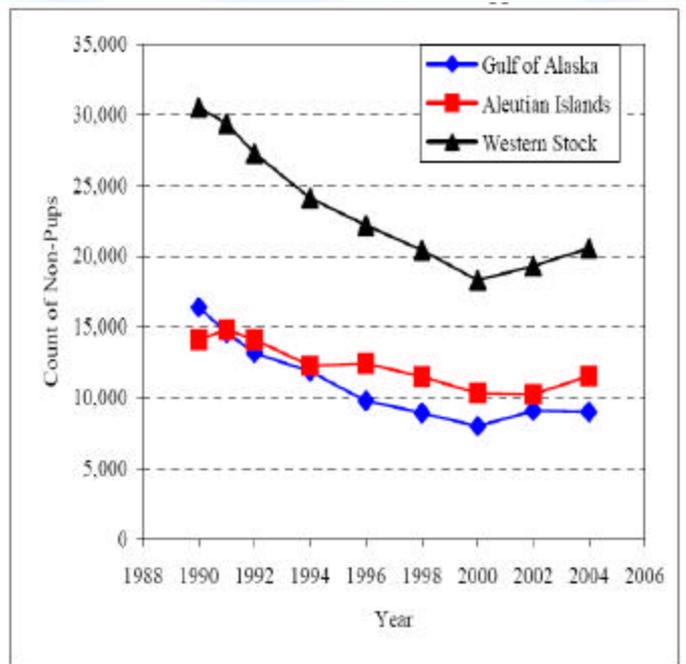




Steller Sea Lion Population Status

Western "Endangered" Population

- 1953-1960: aerial surveys estimate up to 180,000 Steller sea lions in Western population
- 1978-1989: population from Gulf of Alaska through eastern Aleutian Islands declined an estimated 70%
- Population decline apparent in all regions, although not at the same rate
- 2000-2004; increase of 5% per year

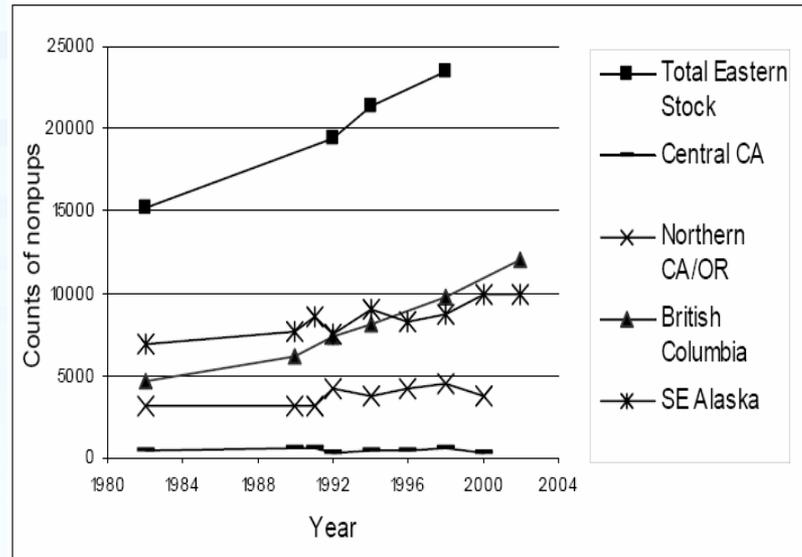




Steller Sea Lion Population Status

Eastern "Threatened" Population

- 1985-1989: Steller sea lions in Southeast Alaska increased by almost 4% per year
- 1990 to 2000: overall increase of 29% (almost 2% per year)
- Numbers in central and southern California have been decreasing but Eastern stock as a whole is stable or increasing slowly





Potential Contributing Factors for Current “Endangered” Population Trend

- Predation by killer whales
- Nutritional stress: changes in oceanographic conditions (“regime shift”) and/or competition with commercial fisheries
- Parasitism and disease
- Incidental mortality in U.S. and foreign fisheries, including entanglement in lost fishing gear





Steller Sea Lion Research Grants

- Some grants are related to specific Congressional appropriations
- Other grants are distributed through competitive proposal system
- Major grant recipients include:
 - NOAA Office of Atmospheric Research
 - NOAA National Ocean Services
 - North Pacific Fisheries Management Council
 - Alaska Department of Fish & Game
 - Alaska SeaLife Center
 - North Pacific Universities Research Consortium
 - University of Alaska
 - Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation





Steller Sea Lion Research Permits

- Permits are issued jointly under Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act
- Permit process requires submission of formal application
- Permit applications are available for public comment and are reviewed by Marine Mammal Commission and others
- Issuance of permits is a federal action under NEPA and Section 7 of the ESA





Who Conducts Research on Steller Sea Lions?

There are currently 8 permits for research in the wild (valid through 2010):

- Alaska Department of Fish & Game
- Alaska SeaLife Center
- Aleutians East Borough
- National Marine Mammal Laboratory (2 permits)
- North Pacific Universities Marine Mammal Research Consortium
- Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife
- Texas A&M University

There are additional permits for research on captive animals, studies involving tissue samples only, and studies related to killer whale predation





Current Types of Research on Steller Sea Lions

- Aerial, vessel, and ground surveys
- Scat collection
- Capture and temporary restraint
- Standard morphometrics
- Tissue sampling (skin, muscle, blubber, vibrissae, teeth, blood, etc.)
- Body composition analysis by injection of stable isotopes, ultrasound, BIA, portable metabolic chamber
- Temporary and Permanent Marking
- External and internal scientific instruments
- Stomach intubation and enemas
- Removal from the wild for temporary captivity & associated studies





Current Steller Sea Lion Research Permits

- Research is conducted range-wide in U.S. from CA to AK
- Research is conducted year-round
- Permits allow disturbance of entire U.S. population during aerial surveys
- Permits allow capture of over 2,000 pups and over 2,000 juveniles and adults annually
 - 1,500 pups and 1,400 non-pups may be flipper tagged
 - 1,100 pups and 1,085 non-pups may be hot branded
 - 130 pups and 1,430 non-pups may have instruments attached
 - 16 juveniles/year may be transported to the ASLC for temporary captivity (up to 3 months) and associated studies
- Permits allow some animals to be recaptured up to three times per year
- Permits allow research related mortality of up to 60 sea lions per year, not to exceed 18 in the western population





Northern Fur Seal Management Status



Two separate stocks recognized within U.S. waters:

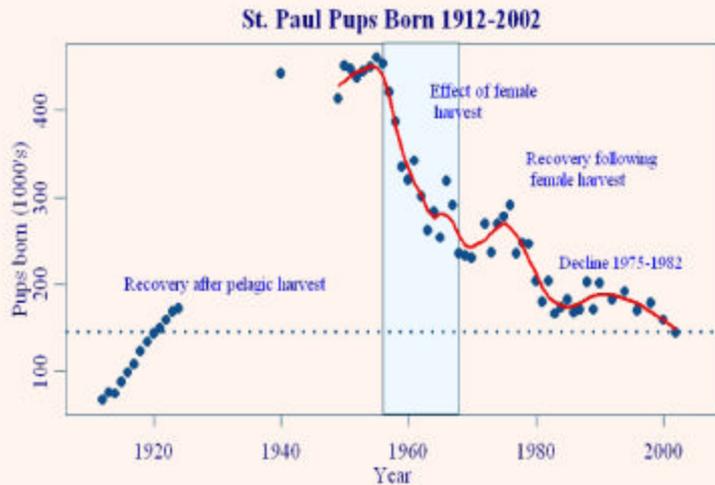
- Eastern Pacific stock (includes all animals in BSAI/GOA)
- San Miguel Island stock

1988: Eastern Pacific stock listed as “depleted” under MMPA





Northern Fur Seal Population Status



- San Miguel Island stock generally increasing; not listed as depleted under MMPA
- Eastern Pacific Stock
 - Over 70% of world population breeds on Pribilof Islands
 - By 1988, had declined to <50% historic level
 - Current population trend is decreasing
 - Bogoslof Island colony increased by 12% per year since 1997





Potential Contributing Factors for Current “Depleted” Population Trends

- Residual effects from past commercial harvest
- Incidental mortality in fisheries
- Nutritional stress: competition with commercial fisheries and/or changes in oceanographic conditions
- Parasitism and disease
- Predation
- Habitat degradation: pollution; coastal development, oil & gas exploration
- Subsistence harvests
- Vessel traffic and tourism





Who Conducts Research on Northern Fur Seals?

- Permits are issued under the MMPA
- There are currently 6 permits and authorizations for research in the wild (valid through 2010):
 - NMFS National Marine Mammal Laboratory
 - NMFS Southwest Fisheries Science Center
 - B. Stewart, Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute
 - Pribilof Islands Stewardship Program
 - S. Insley, Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute
 - M. Williams, Alaska
- There are additional permits for studies involving tissue samples only and studies related to killer whale predation





Current Types of Research on Northern Fur Seals

- Aerial and ground surveys
- Scat collection
- Capture and temporary restraint
- Standard morphometrics
- Tissue sampling (skin, muscle, blubber, vibrissae, teeth, blood, etc.)
- Body composition analysis
- Temporary Marking
- External scientific instruments
- Behavioral observations





Proposed Action and Alternatives

- What is the Proposed Action?

To facilitate conduct of research activities related to conservation and recovery of Steller sea lions and northern fur seals by awarding grants and issuing permits to qualified individuals and institutions





What is the purpose of this Proposed Action?

- NMFS awards grants to assist in funding of activities identified by Congress or NMFS as important for management of protected species
- Purpose of issuing permits is to provide an exemption to MMPA and ESA prohibitions on “takes” for conduct of bona fide scientific research and enhancement activities





What Is the Need for this Proposed Action?

- Facilitate research needed to identify, evaluate or resolve conservation problems for the species
- Information from authorized research is needed by NMFS to:
 - Identify natural and anthropogenic factors limiting the populations or stocks
 - Identify reasonable actions to minimize impacts of human activities
 - Promote recovery





Why Are Permits Required for Research?

- Permits allows researchers specific exemptions to the prohibitions on “takes” under the ESA and MMPA
- ESA and MMPA prohibit “takes” of threatened and endangered species and of marine mammals, respectively
 - ESA defines “take” as “to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.”
 - MMPA defines “take” as “to ‘harass, hunt, capture, collect or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, collect or kill any marine mammal.”





Major Environmental Issues to Be Addressed in the EIS

- NMFS' information needs for conservation of the species
- Types & amount of research activities to be permitted
- Mitigation measures
- Cumulative impacts of research activities on Steller sea lions, northern fur seals, and the environment





Some Specific Information You Can Provide to NMFS

- ***Types of research***

- Are there critical research needs not already identified in the species' Recovery and Conservation Plans? If so, what are they and how will they benefit the species?
- What are the most appropriate methods to obtain the information required by the Recovery and Conservation Plans?





Some Specific Information You Can Provide to NMFS

- ***Level of research effort***

- How much of a specific activity (e.g., hot branding) is enough for management and conservation needs? Can there be too much?
- Should NMFS set limits on these activities?
- Should there be different standards or more restrictions for research on certain age/sex/reproductive classes or life history stages? If so, what classes/stages and what should the limitations be?





Some Specific Information You Can Provide to NMFS

- ***Coordination of research***

- What are the most appropriate mechanisms to ensure that research is coordinated?
- Should NMFS limit the number of permits to increase coordination? If so, how should this be accomplished?
- Should researchers operating under different permits be required to use the same or similar methods? If so, what methods are the most appropriate for different research categories?
- How should NMFS compare data from different permit holders when making management decisions?





Some Specific Information You Can Provide to NMFS

- ***Qualifications of researchers***

- How much expertise or prior experience should a permit applicant, Principal Investigator, or anyone else have with the specific methods for which they seek a permit?





Some Specific Information You Can Provide to NMFS

- ***Effects of research***

- NMFS will be assessing possible effects of the various research methods. Anyone having relevant information they believe NMFS should consider should provide a complete reference or citation.
- NMFS is also seeking recommendations for study designs that could detect or predict the effects of research activities on Steller sea lions and northern fur seals





Oral Comments



**And a Few
Administrative
Issues**





- Please sign in at the registration table
- You will have **4 minutes** to offer your oral comments
- This meeting is being recorded, on audio tape and by a court reporter to ensure an accurate and complete record of your comments





Written Comments

Your Options Are:

- Hand in prepared written comments to us today
- Use written comment sheets provided here and turn them in
- Submit written comments for receipt by 25 February 2006 to:



Stephen L. Leathery;
Permits, Conservation, and Education Division; Office of Protected
Resources, NMFS;
1315 East West Highway, Room 13705
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Email: ssleis.comments@noaa.gov
Fax: 301-427-2583





Additional Information

- Available on NMFS web page

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/steller.htm>

- To receive future copies of the Draft EIS, please register here and/or check availability on the website





5 Minute Break



**Collating Sign-Up
Cards
for Public Oral
Comments**





**Thank you for participating
in the
Steller Sea Lion and Northern
Fur Seal Research EIS
Scoping Process**

