

Minutes: Eighth Meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (18-20 November 1998)

I.1 Introduction

The eighth meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (AKSRG) was held at the Rural CAP Office in Anchorage, Alaska, from 18 - 20 November 1998. The purposes of the meeting included: 1) initial review of revised 1999 Stock Assessment Reports for NMFS stocks in Alaska, 2) review of status of the Cook Inlet stock of beluga whale, 3) review of NMFS and FWS plans for marine mammal research and management, and 4) planning for joint SRG meeting in Spring 1999. Appendix 1 presents the list of AKSRG participants and invited participants. Charlie Johnson was introduced as a new member to the AKSRG, filling the vacancy created by the departure of Caleb Pungowiyi. Appendix 2 presents the adopted agenda. Appendix 3 lists the background papers that were distributed prior to the meeting or made available during the meeting. The meeting was chaired by Lloyd Lowry. Doug DeMaster and Brian Fadely agreed to be the rapporteurs.

I.2 Adoption of Agenda

The agenda was adopted as shown in Appendix 2.

1.3 Approve Draft Minutes from Previous Meeting

The draft minutes from the seventh meeting of the AKSRG were approved with no additional changes.

1.4 Election of a Chair for 1999

There was unanimous agreement to re-elect Lloyd Lowry. Lowry was thanked by the group for all of his hard work in directing AKSRG activities and in chairing its meetings. Lowry accepted.

1.5 Other Business

AKSRG members were asked to keep receipts for the hotel and airline tickets, as appropriate, and to submit these with a signed travel reimbursement form to Scott Hill immediately after the meeting. AKSRG members also thanked Carl Jack and the Rural-CAP staff for their willingness to again host the AKSRG at their facility in Anchorage.

2.1 Cook Inlet Beluga Whales

Lowry introduced the topic by noting that the Marine Mammal Protection Act, as amended in 1994, directed NMFS and the FWS to establish Scientific Review Groups to

comment on the status of marine mammal stocks in U.S. waters in three regions: Alaska, Pacific, and the Atlantic-Gulf of Mexico. Lowry added that at this meeting the AKSRG would develop specific recommendations to NMFS regarding the status of and needed management and research actions for Cook Inlet beluga whales. These comments would be considered by NMFS in revising the Stock Assessment Reports (SARs) for Alaskan marine mammals in 1999.

Lee Stephan, Cook Inlet Marine Mammal Council (CIMMC), summarized the position of the CIMMC regarding the status of this stock, as follows: 1) additional input from beluga specialists is needed to fully evaluate the status of this stock, 2) harvest numbers are not accurate, 3) Cook Inlet beluga whales should not be managed as a distinct stock, 4) additional information is needed regarding the life history of this stock (e.g., food habits, movement patterns, mortality, reproduction, etc.), and 5) more information is needed regarding the subsistence needs of Alaska Native families in the Cook Inlet Region and the extent to which beluga meat and muktuk is used to satisfy this need. He added that the hunters had cooperated with NMFS in 1997 regarding enumeration of harvest mortality, but that now this information was being used to adversely impact hunters. This situation has led to a lack of cooperation of the hunters with NMFS in subsequent years.

Matt Kookesh commented that management of Alaska Native harvests should not be based on PBR-type quotas because the PBR management approach had been designed to manage marine mammal mortality incidental to commercial fishing. Rather NMFS should use a comanagement-type infrastructure, as mandated in the MMPA, to manage this stock. Charlie Johnson added that the walrus hunters had similar concerns. To some extent, past comments of the AKSRG to FWS regarding walrus management in Alaska had helped resolve some of these conflicts. Joel Blatchford commented that from his perspective NMFS was overly focusing on Alaska Native subsistence hunters. Other human activities were likely having adverse effects on this stock, such as whale watching and eco-tourism programs.

DeMaster briefly summarized what was meant by a PBR approach to management. Rod Hobbs (NMFS) briefly summarized the way in which beluga whales in Cook Inlet were surveyed. Willie Goodwin responded that NMFS needed to develop a better way to count belugas in Cook Inlet and in other areas of the State. Dan Alex, CIMMC, noted the following: 1) there was a great deal of uncertainty in the estimates for abundance and harvest levels, 2) based on comments from long time hunters, Cook Inlet belugas were comprised of four separate types of belugas, 3) survey techniques needed to be improved to better estimate the number of gray and black (i.e., young whales) in the population, 4) additional information on movements was needed, and therefore, satellite tagging of beluga whales should be initiated as soon as possible, and 5) it was unlikely that Cook Inlet beluga whales represented a distinct stock in Alaska.

Ross Schaeffer, Alaska Beluga Whale Committee (ABWC), disagreed with the statement made by Alex that the Cook Inlet population of belugas should not be managed as a distinct stock. He added that based on his experience, when the hunters and the scientists cooperate, all

parties can benefit. Further, in his opinion the primary problem regarding the status of Cook Inlet beluga whales was related to the commercial hunting of these animals by a small number of hunters in the region. He noted that the ABWC had asked all of the hunters who live outside of the Cook Inlet area to stop hunting beluga whales in this area. Carl Jack (Rural Cap) responded that in 1998, 20 of the 40 landed beluga whales were taken by hunters who lived outside of the Cook Inlet Region. John James noted that he thought that the influx of sport fishers in the Kenai area has caused animals in that area to leave.

Johnson asked NMFS whether the \$1.5 million that Congress had authorized for comanagement of marine mammals in Alaska had ever been appropriated to NMFS. Tom Eagle, Office of Protected Resources (NMFS) responded that, while NMFS had requested that their budget be increased to include an appropriation of \$1.5 million, the request had never made it through the budget office in the Department of Commerce (note: NMFS is part of the Department of Commerce). Eagle added that NMFS would continue to request that these funds be added to its budget. He also noted that Congress "earmarked" several Native organizations in Alaska for funding, including the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission, Alaska Beluga Whale Committee, and the Alaska Native Harbor Seal Commission. Johnson commented that FWS was likely to get \$1.0 million in FY99 for the purpose of comanagement with Alaska Native Organizations.

Delice Calcote, CIMMC, commented that the CIMMC had changed to a Tribal Organization in June of 1998, where the CIMMC has tribal authority over its members. This should help with getting CIMMC members to restrict their hunting of Cook Inlet beluga whales, but unfortunately not all hunters belong to the CIMMC. She also added that the CIMMC had not received all of the reports from NMFS regarding this population of whales. Finally, she noted that it was unlikely that the CIMMC would be successful in managing beluga whales in Cook Inlet without additional support from the Federal government (note: current level of support is approximately \$15K).

Marie Adams, ABWC (and participant in meetings of the International Whaling Commission- IWC), commented that the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission had worked out similar problems with the hunters, the environmental community, and government scientists. She offered the assistance of the ABWC in helping the CIMMC and NMFS manage this population. She noted that the primary priority should be to maintain a healthy population of beluga whales in Cook Inlet, which would allow subsistence hunting by Alaska Native hunters in perpetuity. To achieve this goal, the hunters would have to cooperate with the CIMMC and NMFS in such things as reporting struck and lost whales, monitoring the harvest, collecting biological samples from harvested whales, etc. Finally, she added that there were likely many possible reasons for the apparent decline in abundance of this stock and that the hunters shouldn't believe they are necessarily the cause, but that they need to recognize what can be done to prevent this stock from becoming extinct.

2.2 Scientific Results

Dave Rugh, NMFS, summarized a report on changes in the distribution of beluga whales in Cook Inlet. He noted that, relative to 15-30 years ago, animals were no longer being sighted in the lower inlet or in the middle of the inlet. Lowry commented that beluga whales seem to like to hunt in muddy, shallow waters (areas where killer whales rarely venture). Blatchford noted that in the last 30 years there have been many oil rigs put up in the middle of the inlet and it was likely that the whales were avoiding them. Monica Reidel, Alaska Native Harbor Seal Commission, added that Cordova fishermen have reported seeing beluga whales in that area. Also, Alex noted that killer whales started coming into the Cook Inlet in 1989.

Greg O'Corry-Crowe, NMFS, summarized the results of his genetic studies on beluga whales in Alaska. He noted that he had over 70 samples from Cook Inlet beluga whales, which represents a very good database to work from. His results indicate that this stock is isolated from other stocks of beluga whales in Alaska. In fact, it is the most distinct stock of beluga whales in Alaska. That is, there were five different haplotypes found in the sample and the frequency of these five haplotypes relative to the corresponding frequency in other stocks was very distinctive. This means that there is virtually no movement of animals from other stocks to this stock. Lowry added that it was likely that these animals have been genetically isolated from the other stocks of whales in Alaska since the last ice age (approximately 10,000 years ago).

Rod Hobbs, NMFS, summarized his work on estimating abundance using aerial surveys. He noted that he had five estimates of abundance from 1994 through 1998 and that these estimates accounted for: 1) beluga whales not at the surface at the time the airplane flew over the group, 2) the difficulty in seeing small, gray animals relative to large, white animals, and 3) missed groups of beluga whales. Surveys were flown in June to improve consistency in counts between years, but also because early in the time series surveys had been flown in May, June, and July with the maximum number of animals counted in June. At this time the animals are concentrated in tight groups along the coast near the mouths of rivers. The five-year average was 505 animals. The largest estimate was from 1994 (653 animals); while the smallest estimate was from 1998 (347 animals). Johnson asked whether the apparent decline in abundance was consistent with available data on harvest levels. Hobbs responded that it was. Alex commented that it was impossible to know exactly any of the parameters used in the equation to estimate abundance and that the estimate of abundance included cumulative errors. Therefore, the abundance estimate proposed by Hobbs was not necessarily true. Hobbs responded that the confidence interval associated with each estimate reflected the cumulative level of uncertainty in each of the parameters used to estimate abundance and that it was very likely that the true number of beluga whales in Cook Inlet was within these bounds. Calcote commented that she had participated in one of the Cook Inlet surveys and that during that survey offshore waters had not been surveyed. Hobbs responded that the zigzag pattern used to survey the offshore area typically resulted in zero sightings of beluga whales. Therefore, the offshore surveys were only conducted once in a given year, while the coastal waters of the upper inlet were surveyed several times in a given year.

Several people commented that the available radio-telemetry data on time spent at the surface and time spent diving was inadequate. Hobbs responded that the abundance estimate was indeed quite sensitive to the estimate of time spent below the surface and that additional data would reduce the confidence interval around the abundance estimate. However, he added that the uncertainty associated with the estimate of time below the surface had been incorporated into the confidence interval for the abundance estimate. Kathy Frost, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), added that she had radio-tagged beluga whale in Bristol Bay and Canada in the 1980s and that the data she had collected on surfacing times were very similar to those reported by Hobbs. She also added that in this case, even if the abundance estimate were twice as high as that estimated by Hobbs et al., the harvest level reported from the past few years was still not sustainable. DeMaster noted that for the current level of harvest to be sustainable, the current population would have to include roughly four to six times the estimated population.

Lowry asked whether small calves were seen in the video recordings of schools that had been surveyed. Hobbs responded that small calves were counted in the video images, but that the probability of missing a small calf was greater than the probability of missing an adult size animal because 1) the size of the image was smaller and 2) the calf could be underneath its mother. Lowry also asked whether small calves tended to spend more time at the surface. Hobbs responded that this had been investigated using the video tapes of schools surveyed and that in general this was not the case (at least during June, when the animals were generally in shallow water).

Barb Mahoney, NMFS, summarized her report on harvest levels since 1987. She noted that the ADFG had interviewed hunters regarding subsistence hunting between 1987 and 1993, but that not all hunters had been contacted. In 1994-1996 the CIMMC had developed a report on the beluga whale hunt, which included estimates of the number of whales struck and lost for 1995 and 1996. In 1997, no formal report was prepared by the CIMMC; however, information was summarized by one of the hunters and given to NMFS. Finally, the available data for the 1998 season had been summarized earlier by Carl Jack, but that these data were considered preliminary. It was noted that most of the hunting in Cook Inlet took place between April and October. In summary, a minimum of 70 whales per year were killed since 1995. Several participants commented that NMFS should fund a study on traditional harvest practices in Cook Inlet to try to get a better estimate of the number of animals harvested annually in the 1980s and earlier. Jack reiterated his earlier statement that there had been 20 confirmed kills by hunters who lived in the area and 20 unconfirmed kills by hunters from outside the area. No estimate for the number of whales struck and lost is available. Art Nuglene, who has hunted beluga whales in Cook Inlet for over 20 years, commented that the estimated harvest levels prior to 1996 were too low. He further commented that the only way to get an accurate estimate of hunting mortality was to hire an Alaska Native harvest monitor for the entire hunting season. Johnson added that this problem could not be resolved until the hunters, CIMMC, and NMFS started to cooperate. He added that Alaska Native hunters were used as harvest monitors for managing the hunting of polar bears and walrus and that this approach had proven very successful.

Brendan Kelly raised the issue of whether NMFS was willing to initiate a marking/tagging program for all harvested beluga whales in Cook Inlet. Lowry added that this recommendation had been forwarded to NMFS by the AKSRG at its last two meetings. As Lowry recalled, the position of the Regional Office was that it preferred a strategy of focusing on comanagement to resolve this issue rather than trying to go forward simultaneously with comanagement and marking/tagging regulations. Mahoney added that in her discussions with enforcement officers within NMFS there were several unresolved problems with how to enforce a marking/tagging program under the MMPA.

Several participants commented that the Federal government was allowing the overhunting of this stock rather than enforcing a strict quota. DeMaster noted that under the MMPA, NMFS had limited authority to restrict Alaska Native harvest of marine mammals for the purpose of subsistence. He added that the MMPA did allow NMFS to restrict hunting of non-listed stocks, but only in the case of wasteful taking or inhumane killing. However, were this stock listed as either depleted under the MMPA or endangered/threatened under the ESA, NMFS would have the authority to restrict Alaska Native harvest.

2.3 Status of Co-Management of Cook Inlet Beluga Whale

As noted previously, the CIMMC is in the process of negotiating a comanagement agreement with NMFS regarding the management of Cook Inlet beluga whales. Several members of the CIMMC commented that they supported an immediate one to three year moratorium on subsistence hunting of this stock and in general supported a ban on the commercial sale of muktuk. Jack mentioned plans to hold a meeting of hunters to discuss possible conservation actions including: 1) protection of the Suisitna River Delta calving area, 2) hunting in shallow water only, and 3) requiring beluga whales to be harpooned before shooting. Schaeffer, ABWC, added that the members of the ABWC had agreed not to hunt beluga whales in Cook Inlet when they were visiting Anchorage and that the ABWC was opposed to the commercial sale of muktuk in Alaska. It was recognized that NMFS and the CIMMC would continue their efforts to develop a comanagement agreement, but that this would not necessarily be binding for Alaska Native hunters who were not affiliated with the tribes represented by the CIMMC.

3. Review of Draft 1999 Stock Assessment Report for Cook Inlet Beluga Whales

Regarding the issue of what value should be used in the PBR equation for the minimum estimate of abundance (N_{min}), Kelly proposed that the most recent population estimate (i.e., for 1998) and the associated N_{min} be used rather than the 5-year average using data from 1994-1998. Denby Lloyd commented that the AKSRG has highlighted its concerns regarding the status of this stock to NMFS over the last several years. He, therefore, agreed with Kelly that the estimate from 1998 should be used to estimate PBR for this stock. There was general agreement among AKSRG members with this proposal. It was also agreed that a reference to Rugh et al. (In

review) regarding changes in the distribution of beluga whales in Cook Inlet be added to the section on population size.

Regarding the issue of what value should be used for the Recovery Factor (RF) for this stock, Sue Hills recommended that the current value of 1.0 should be reduced to 0.5, as the status of this stock was uncertain. She further proposed that the AKSRG prepare another letter to the Regional Director regarding the status of this stock. There was general agreement among AKSRG members with this proposal.

Regarding the issue of trends in abundance, Milo Adkison noted that the statement that there was not a statistically significant decline in the abundance estimates was likely due to the small time period over which estimates were available and the relatively high CV of the estimates. From a management perspective, he recommended including a figure in the stock assessment report showing the five abundance estimates (and associated 95% confidence intervals), and noting in the text that the population had apparently declined 47% over a four-year period. There was general agreement among AKSRG members with this recommendation.

Regarding the issue of other human-related mortality, Scott Hill (NMFS) commented that the available information on fishery interactions indicated that very few whales were incidentally caught and drowned in gillnets or other fishing gear in Cook Inlet. Brad Smith, NMFS, added that in 1999 NMFS was planning to initiate an observer program for several of the category II fisheries in this area. There was general agreement that a statement about this program should be added to the stock assessment report. Lowry noted that many people who live in the Cook Inlet area are very concerned about the impact of 1) oil and gas development, 2) sewage outfall from the city of Anchorage, 3) noise pollution associated with shipping and ecotourism (e.g., whale watching), etc. Gary Harrison, Native hunter from Chickaloon, added that he thought the fishermen in Cook Inlet were taking too many salmon, which was also hurting this stock of beluga whale. Members of the AKSRG agreed that NMFS should expand the section in the Stock Assessment Report on "Habitat Concerns" for this stock and that in the letter to NMFS regarding the status of this stock, issues of habitat concerns should also be raised.

4. Review of Other Stocks of Beluga Whales

Lowry reported that the ABWC was in the process of finalizing several reports regarding the abundance of the Bering Sea stocks of beluga whales in Alaska, as well as a summary of Alaska Native subsistence harvest mortality. These reports would be the focus of an ABWC sponsored workshop in late March 1999, and would be presented at the 1999 meeting of the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in May. During this meeting, a world-wide review of the status of beluga whale and narwhal populations would be undertaken by the IWC's subcommittee on small cetaceans. A similar review was held by the IWC in 1991. Lowry added that new information presented in these reports should be incorporated into the final SARs for 1999.

4.1 Bristol Bay Beluga Whale

Lowry summarized the available information on this stock of beluga whale. He noted that there were no substantive changes from the status of the stock in the mid-1980s. He noted that the abundance estimate was likely conservative because 1) there was no correction for groups of animals that were at the surface but missed, 2) the entire area was not surveyed (e.g., Kuskokwim Delta), and 3) a conservative correction factor was used for 2-4 year old animals, which are more difficult to see than adult-sized animals. He noted that the ABWC had scheduled a survey of this stock to take place in 1999.

Lowry summarized the harvest data for 1995-1997. Molly Chythlook (ABWC) added that there were eight villages in the Bristol Bay area where beluga whales were harvested. She noted that beluga whales have coexisted with the salmon fishery in this area for many years. Several participants asked about the fishery interactions, especially in years of relatively low salmon returns. Chythlook responded that only one whale had been reported becoming entangled in a salmon net in recent years in this area. Several participants asked why the harvest data for this stock were averaged over a five-year period. Lowry responded that because the harvest data were highly variable from year to year, it was believed that a five-year average was more indicative of "normal" harvest practices than averages based on fewer years (e.g., 3 years). Also, a 5-year period for averaging harvests had been recommended by the ABWC. There was general agreement among AKSRG members that this practice should be continued in the beluga whale stock assessment reports.

4.2 Eastern Bering Sea Beluga Whale

Lowry summarized the status of several papers that the ABWC was pulling together for a workshop on the status of beluga whales in Alaska, which will take place in March/April 1999. He noted that an aerial survey of the Norton Sound/Yukon Delta region is currently scheduled to take place in 1999. Regarding the conservative nature of the existing estimate, Lowry commented that the estimate of 7,986 beluga should be considered a minimum mostly because 1) only part of the area occupied by beluga was included in the estimate of abundance, and 2) the effects of sea state on sighting rates were not incorporated into the estimate (note: a paper by DeMaster et al. (In review: Fishery Bulletin) on the effects of sea state on sightings rates of beluga whales in this area indicates that sightings rates in Beaufort sea state 1 (calm seas) are significantly higher by a factor of 3 than sightings rates in Beaufort 2 and higher). After some discussion, the AKSRG concluded that the estimate of 7,986 animals could be considered a minimum estimate of abundance.

Regarding subsistence harvest, several people questioned the extent to which animals were being killed in commercial or subsistence fishing nets and, if so, whether these mortalities were being reported to the ABWC. Hill responded that he would check on this with Kathy Frost (ADFG). There was general agreement that the issue of personal use nets should be revisited by

the AKSRG at some time in the future. Further, Hill noted that the ABWC had provided harvest mortality data for 1997, including estimates of struck and lost whales.

4.3 Eastern Chukchi Sea Beluga Whale

Lowry noted that all of the available survey data for this stock had recently been summarized in a report for the upcoming ABWC Science workshop (Lowry et al. 1999). As reported in this document, the current abundance estimate is based on counts of animals made between 1989-1991, where the maximum count was 1,200 animals. Based on this count, a minimum abundance estimate of 3,710 was made. Surveys were also conducted in 1996, 1997, and 1998, where maximum counts were approximately 1,035, 130, and 1,172, respectively. However, Lowry and his coauthors noted that the count from 1998 was from one small area, where only one of five recently satellite tagged animals was located. In addition, surveys done to the north of this area indicated a sizeable number of animals were also located along the southern extent of the pack ice. Therefore, because of the comparability of the maximum counts from the 1989-1991 and 1996-1998 periods and because of the negative bias associated with the manner in which these counts were extrapolated to abundance estimates, Lowry recommended, and the AKSRG agreed, that the estimate of 3,710 animals continue to serve as the best estimate of minimum abundance for this stock.

Regarding harvest information, Hill reported that the ABWC had provided the 1997 harvest data, including estimates of whales that were struck and lost.

4.4 Eastern Beaufort Sea Beluga Whale

Lowry summarized the available information for this stock. He noted that the last survey to determine abundance was completed in 1992. He added that there were no known fishery interactions with this stock and that the harvest information for 1997 were provided by the ABWC for animals harvested in Alaska and by the Fisheries Joint Management Committee for animals harvested in Canada. The current level of harvest (including struck and lost animals) was well below the PBR. Finally, Lowry noted that an agreement between the North Slope Borough (Alaska) and the Inuvialuit (Canada) had recently been signed regarding the management of this stock of beluga whale. The AKSRG agreed that no changes should be made to the stock assessment report, other than updating of subsistence harvest information.

5. Review of ESA-listed Stocks

5.1 Stocks of Steller Sea Lion

5.1.1 Western Stock of Steller Sea Lion

Hill summarized the proposed changes in the 1999 stock assessment report. He noted that there was no report to reference regarding counts of animals used to estimate abundance or a reference for the abundance estimate. The AKSRG agreed with Hill that this was a problem and

recommended that NMML develop a report that details the methods and results of the surveys used to enumerate Steller sea lions. Lowry questioned the approach used by NMFS in estimating total abundance in that the count data from only trend sites, and not all sites, were used in the extrapolation. After some discussion, the AKSRG recommended that because there were no data on proportion hauled for many of the sites to allow the reliable extrapolation to total abundance a new approach should be used in the SARs. Hill recommended that an approach similar to that used for the eastern stock be used, where minimum abundance was estimated as the sum of all of the counts of non-pups and pups. There was general agreement among AKSRG members that this approach be adopted.

A discussion of the appropriate value for the maximum net productivity rate (R_{max}) followed. There was concern among AKSRG members that in using the PBR approach the assumption was being made that if human-related annual removals were below the PBR, it could be expected that a population would either recover or would remain healthy, with a high likelihood. After some discussion, it was agreed that the following words by Paul Wade (NMFS) be incorporated into the section on PBR:

“However, it should be noted that the PBR management approach was developed with the understanding that human-related mortalities would be the primary reason for observed declines in abundance for marine mammal stocks in U.S. waters. For at least this stock, this assumption seems unwarranted.”

Regarding the value to be used for the recovery factor (RF) for this stock, several members noted that the recent census information indicated that the observed decline in abundance was continuing unabated. Therefore, there was general agreement that the RF should be reduced to 0.1 from 0.15.

Several participants in the meeting commented that the apparent decline in both the number of animals harvested and the number of animals struck and lost by Alaska Native subsistence hunters may be an artifact of the manner in which these data were collected. In particular, it appears that for the Pribilof Islands there are discrepancies between estimates produced by ADFG and observations made by NMFS personnel. Kookesh commented that retrospective surveys, like the one reported for this stock by Wolfe and Mischler (ADFG report), have worked in other areas in Alaska and there was no reason to believe they were not producing reliable results here. He noted that one probable cause of the decline in the number of animals harvested was the decline in the number of sea lions in the area. He added that an expansion of comanagement-type activities was needed to get the best possible data on the harvest. Lowry suggested that at a future meeting, the AKSRG should ask Wolfe and Mischler to attend. Johnson added that regarding discussions of Alaska Native harvests of Steller sea lions, Larry Mercurief (St. Paul, AK), should also be invited. Several AKSRG members expressed their frustration with the NMFS Regional Office's inability to resolve this issue in a timely manner. After some discussion, AKSRG members recommended that NMFS should resolve any remaining

