



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

National Marine Fisheries Service

P.O. Box 21668

Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

May 6, 2009

Eric Olson, Chairman
North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 W. 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2252

Dear Mr. Olson:

Thank you for your letter requesting that the National Marine Fisheries Service consider the inclusion of new data into the Biological Opinion (BO) on the federal groundfish fisheries. These data include: 1) 2009 Steller sea lion pup counts scheduled for this summer's field season; 2) non-pup surveys in portions of southeast Alaska and the Gulf of Alaska aimed at evaluating hypotheses about the influence of survey timing and emigration/immigration on the 2008 non-pup survey (also scheduled for 2009 field season); and 3) a draft of a report by Maniscalco et al. from the Alaska Sea Life Center (Technical Report ASLC-0901).

In this particular case, we believe that the new surveys can potentially reduce uncertainty and controversy about important elements in our analysis. Given the current schedule, this information would have been collected, but not integrated into the analysis. Additionally, while we have both the draft Maniscalco report and a review we requested of the report by the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, the authors have not had a chance to fully consider and respond to the reviews. With a relatively short extension of the BO schedule, we can incorporate all of this information into the analyses, interpret information pertinent to understanding trends in abundance and reproduction in light of these new data, and produce a BO that provides a stronger analysis of the effects of the groundfish fisheries on Steller sea lions and their critical habitat. We will plan to have the BO available for Council consideration in March 2010.

Sincerely,


for Robert D. Mecum
Acting Administrator, Alaska Region

cc: Kaja Brix
Samuel Rauch
Sue Salvesson



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