



Review Process

Draft Biological Opinion

Federal Groundfish Fisheries

Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and the Gulf of Alaska

NOAA Fisheries is required by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to insure that any action it authorizes, such as the commercial groundfish fisheries in Alaska, is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. The western distinct population segment (wDPS) of Steller sea lions is listed as endangered. Recent information on Steller sea lion pup production and non-pup trends in abundance confirms that the western Aleutian Islands sub-region of wDPS continues to decline and may have already declined by as much as 50% in the last decade. A decline of this magnitude is inconsistent with the recovery guidelines in the Steller Sea Lion Recovery Plan. Therefore, urgency in mitigating potential adverse impacts on the ESA listed species is warranted.

The draft Biological Opinion (draft BiOp) evaluates the potential impacts of the commercial groundfish fishery in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands region and Gulf of Alaska region on species listed under the ESA and designated critical habitat. The draft BiOp is available to the public from the NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region website: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/>. NOAA Fisheries is accepting public comment on the draft BiOp until 5 p.m. AKDT on August 27 (see details below).

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) also will review the draft BiOp at a special meeting scheduled for August 16-19, 2010 in Anchorage, Alaska. Information on the meeting is available on the Council's website: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/npfmc/default.htm>. The draft BiOp was provided to the Council in advance of the August meeting to allow the Council time to review the draft BiOp and suggest revisions for NOAA Fisheries to consider before NOAA Fisheries issues the final Biological Opinion in late 2010, prior to the commencement of the 2011 groundfish fisheries. NOAA Fisheries delayed the release of the draft BiOp from March 2010 to August 2010 to allow the Administrator of the Alaska Region time to complete a comprehensive review of the draft BiOp. A previously scheduled review of the draft BiOp by the Center of Independent Experts (CIE) had to be cancelled because of this delay. After issuance of the final BiOp and regulations implementing its reasonable and prudent alternative, NOAA Fisheries now intends to schedule a review of the final Biological Opinion by the CIE in 2011. Following completion of this review, NOAA Fisheries will determine how best to proceed in light of the CIE's recommendations. Possible responses include reinitiation of formal consultation if new information reveals effects of the action that may affect listed species or critical habitat in a manner or to an extent not previously considered. If the Council decides to

undertake a peer review process of its own, NOAA Fisheries will work with Council to coordinate that review with the CIE review.

NOAA Fisheries is accepting public comment on the draft Biological Opinion until 5 p.m. AKDT on August 27. Comments should be submitted to:

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Or hand-deliver comments to:

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