UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Silver Spring, MD 20910

JUL 20 2016

Ms. Kate Wynne
Chair, Alaska Scientific Review Group
P.O. Box 210065
Auke Bay, Alaska 99821

Dear Ms. Wynne:

Thank you for the letter from Lloyd Lowry to Eileen Sobeck, NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, transmitting recommendations from the February 2016 meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (SRG). The letter was forwarded to me because the Office of Protected Resources within NOAA Fisheries is responsible for national programs under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and leads the agency's coordination of the SRGs.

I am pleased to hear the Alaska SRG's meeting and the Joint SRG meeting held immediately prior were helpful in facilitating discussions of national and regional marine mammal assessment issues. The Alaska SRG made many valuable comments and recommendations during the meetings, and our responses are in the enclosure.

I want to thank you for agreeing to Chair the Alaska SRG upon the end of Mr. Lowry's tenure. I appreciate the continued service and contributions by members of the Alaska SRG in providing advice and support to NOAA Fisheries in accordance with the MMPA. I look forward to our continued partnership to improve the science supporting the conservation of marine mammals.

Sincerely,

Donna S. Wieting

Donna S. Wieting
Director, Office of Protected Resources

Enclosure

Responses to Recommendations of the
Alaska Regional Scientific Review Group

1) *NOAA Fisheries should conduct a review of the status of eastern stock Steller sea lions with respect their Optimum Sustainable Population (OSP). Eastern Steller sea lions are considered depleted (below OSP) not because an OSP determination was made but because they were listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This results in them being listed as a strategic stock under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and subject to provisions associated with such a categorization. Solid scientific data show that eastern Steller sea lions have been increasing for several decades, and likely should never have been ESA-listed or considered depleted or strategic under the MMPA.*

NOAA Fisheries is supportive of conducting an OSP determination for this stock.

2) *The Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) should move forward with updating killer whale and humpback whale stock structure and stock assessment reports (SARs). Stock structure used in the SARs is outdated for both species which makes status determinations unreliable. The SRG understands that for humpback whales stock revision is waiting on a final determination of distinct population segments (DPSs) under the ESA based on a proposal published in the Federal Register in April 2015. However, there is no direct connection between MMPA stocks and ESA DPSs so it is not clear why that should be necessary, and we recommend that NMFS move forward with stock revisions. With regard to killer whales, the delay appears to be due to ongoing efforts to finalize a formal stock delineation process and a NMFS policy that requires a supporting technical memo or peer-reviewed paper in order to delineate new stocks. The SRG recommends that those tasks be completed as soon as possible so that killer whale SARs based on appropriate structure are available for review at our 2017 meeting.*

A final rule identifying humpback whale DPSs under the ESA is expected to publish in the Federal Register this summer. Because we anticipate challenges in implementing the ESA and MMPA as a result of DPS and stock delineation differences, the NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources is coordinating an effort to evaluate humpback whale stock structure in light of the DPSs. We expect that the results of this work will be used to guide revisions to the draft 2017 humpback whale SARs.

The AFSC and North Gulf Oceanic Society are collaborating on two review articles (one for transients and one for residents) that summarize all the lines of evidence pertinent to delineating stock structure within existing Alaska killer whale stocks. A new analysis of geographical variation in acoustic calls for transient killer whales in western Alaska will also be incorporated; a parallel study of resident killer whale calls in western Alaska will be incorporated if completed. Additional analysis of genetic data for transient killer whales in the northern North Pacific, which could help further delineate population structure, particularly with regard to stock structure in the eastern Aleutians, False Pass, and Pribilof Islands areas, has not been funded. If resources become available, the results of these analyses will be incorporated into the review. The AFSC intends to submit the draft manuscripts to the Alaska SRG for review prior to their

2017 SRG meeting, so proposed changes in killer whale stock structure can be discussed at the meeting.

3) *We recommend again that each SAR clearly indicate the number of fisheries that potentially interact with a particular marine mammal stock and the number of those fisheries that are monitored. The following is an example of the type of statement that could be included in each SAR: Of the 25 fisheries that potentially interact with this stock, 18 of which have documented mortality and serious injury in the past, 9 have been monitored for bycatch to some extent in the past 10 years. Potential interaction is based on an overlap between the fishery and the range of the stock and gear types with documented mortality and serious injury for this species or analogous species.*

NOAA Fisheries is supportive of this recommendation and will explore the feasibility of including information from the MMPA List of Fisheries in each SAR, including the number of fisheries with documented mortality or serious injury, the number of fisheries that were monitored, and the number of fisheries that could interact with the stock based on fishery location, gear type, and/or interactions with analogous species. If we determine that it is feasible to include this information in the draft SARs, the AFSC and the NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region would first need to document the methods used to identify fisheries with the potential to interact with each stock to ensure that the process is consistent in each SAR.

4) *The AFSC and the Alaska Regional Office should implement changes to the existing process for extrapolating serious injury and mortality (SI/M) from observer records to reduce errors and bias, and use updated methods in the 2017 SARs. A presentation made by Paul Wade, who has recently taken over this task at AFSC, outlined several areas where previous procedures likely underestimated SI/M. SRG members are available to work with Wade on this task.*

In 2016 and early 2017, the AFSC, in consultation with the NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region, will investigate an updated analytical process for extrapolating observed mortalities and serious injuries to provide fishery-wide estimates of serious injury and mortality. We anticipate that estimation will continue to be very challenging because of limited observer coverage. The AFSC will present the proposed approach and results for the Alaska SRG's review at the 2017 SRG meeting.

5) *AFSC and the Alaska Regional Office should consider the recommendations and proposals made at the Joint SRG meeting by Jim Carretta and Jeff Moore (Southwest Fisheries Science Center) regarding alternative approaches for bycatch estimate calculations. The SRG believes that it could recommend particular areas in Alaska where these approaches could be applied.*

The AFSC is reviewing the new information provided at the 2016 Joint SRG meeting to assess whether this is likely to be a helpful approach in Alaska. NOAA Fisheries would welcome any specific suggestions from the Alaska SRG.