



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
THE DIRECTOR

MAR 12 2007

Ms. Elizabeth A. Mathews
Chair, Alaska Scientific Review Group
University of Alaska, Southeast
Natural Sciences Department
11120 Glacier Highway
Juneau, Alaska 99801

Dear Ms. Mathews:

Thank you for your letter regarding the views of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (AKSRG) on the lack of information on ringed, bearded, spotted, and ribbon seals (collectively, ice seals).

As you know, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is responsible for the assessment and conservation of more than 150 stocks of marine mammals within waters under U.S. jurisdiction. Since 1994, when the requirements for preparing stock assessment reports (section 117) and governing the taking of marine mammals incidental to commercial fishing (section 118) were added to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, NMFS has had insufficient resources to address all information and conservation needs at once. Consequently, NMFS' national marine mammal program prepared guidelines for allocating limited resources. These guidelines recognized that NMFS' highest priority for abundance estimates were assigned to situations in which human-caused mortality and serious injury of marine mammals were above sustainable levels for the affected stocks. Between 1995 (when the initial stock assessment reports were completed) and 2004 (when the AKSRG last evaluated the reports for ice seals), NMFS has reported, with concurrence of the AKSRG, that all four species of ice seals were non-strategic stocks, which may be interpreted to mean that NMFS and the AKSRG shared the view that human-caused mortality and serious injury did not exceed sustainable levels.

Recently, the uncertainty regarding the status of the ice seals has become more of an issue due to the unknown, but potentially large, effects of climate change in Arctic marine ecosystems. NMFS' partnerships with Alaska Native communities and organizations—particularly the Ice Seal Committee, with whom NMFS finalized a co-management agreement in October 2006—is guided by a recognition of the importance of ice seals to coastal communities throughout the Arctic. Consequently, the many effects of climate change in the Arctic are critically important, and we understand that the information necessary to evaluate subsequent changes to the marine ecosystem is not being collected.

In response to these information needs, NMFS' Alaska Fisheries Science Center is working with many partner groups, within and outside the federal government, to prepare a comprehensive research initiative to evaluate the loss of sea ice. This initiative will help guide our nation's response to changing climate and altered marine ecosystems and will begin to address the

THE ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR
FOR FISHERIES



Printed on Recycled Paper

recommendations you forwarded. Among these, however, NMFS will likely need to seek a trend index or other substitute for range-wide, reliable abundance estimates for ice seals due to their wide and remote distribution. As the Center's initiative is developed, NMFS will use it in the budget-formulation process, where it will be addressed along with other Administration priorities in preparing future budget requests.

I appreciate your interest in the conservation of ice seals, and I look forward to continuing to work with AKSRG and other review groups in assessing and conserving these and other marine mammals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. T. Hogarth".

W T Hogarth
William T. Hogarth, Ph.D.
Assistant Administrator
for Fisheries