

ALASKA REGIONAL SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

SRG members: Karl Haflinger, Lloyd Lowry, Beth Mathews, Craig Matkin, Mike Miller, Grey Pendleton, Bob Small, Kate Stafford, Robert Suydam, Dave Tallmon, and Kate Wynne

Address correspondence to: Kate Wynne, P.O. Box 210065, Auke Bay AK 99821;
e-mail kwynne@alaska.edu

10 May 2016

Eileen Sobeck
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway, Room 14564
Silver Spring, MD 20910

transmitted by electronic mail

Dear Eileen:

The Alaska Regional Scientific Review Group (AKSRG) held its annual meeting on 24-25 February 2016 at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center's Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle, Washington. The meeting was linked with a Joint SRG meeting held on 23-24 February. The two meetings provided a very good opportunity for SRG members and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and Fish and Wildlife Service staff to discuss national and regional issues with the process of assessing status of marine mammal stocks. During our regional meeting the AKSRG heard updates from Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) and Alaska Regional Office (ARO) personnel and reviewed draft stock assessment reports (SARs).

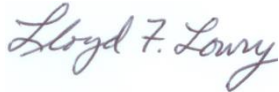
The following are the major recommendations from our meeting:

- NMFS 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.
- AFSC should move forward with updating killer whale and humpback whale stock structure and SARs. Stock structure used in the SARs is outdated for both species which makes status determinations unreliable. The AKSRG 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.

- 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.*
- AFSC and the ARO 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.
- AFSC and the ARO 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 AKSRG believes that it could recommend particular areas in Alaska where these approaches could be applied.

Again, thanks to you and your staff for continued support of the AKSRG and its activities. This was my last meeting as a member of the AKSRG so please send future correspondence to Kate Wynne who will be SRG Chair for the coming year.

Sincerely,



Lloyd F. Lowry, Chair
for the Alaska Scientific Review Group

cc: AKSRG members
Doug DeMaster, NMFS AFSC
John Bengtson, NMFS NMML
Robyn Angliss, NMFS NMML
Jim Balsiger, NMFS AKR
Jon Kurland, NMFS AKR
Richard Merrick, NMFS HQ
Shannon Bettridge, NMFS HQ
Rebecca Lent, MMC
Charlie Hamilton, USFWS