



Fish News

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NOAA Fisheries Begins Western Steller Sea Lion EIS Process

NOAA Fisheries is asking for public input as it begins to prepare an environmental impact statement, or EIS, on Steller sea lion protection measures for the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands management area groundfish fisheries.

The western distinct population segment of Steller sea lions is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act or ESA. By law, NOAA Fisheries must ensure that the groundfish fisheries are not likely to result in “jeopardy of continued existence, or adverse modification or destruction of designated critical habitat,” or JAM, for these Steller sea lions.

Steller sea lion protection measures have been used to manage the groundfish fisheries since 1999. The current protection measures were put into effect in January 2011, after a biological opinion concluded that primarily Pacific cod and Atka mackerel commercial fishing in part of the Aleutian Islands may be preventing the recovery of the endangered Steller sea lions, and might result in JAM. Atka mackerel and Pacific cod are important prey species for Steller sea lions.

The analysis in the EIS will determine the impacts to the human environment resulting from the proposed action and alternatives to restrict groundfish fishing in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands management area to ensure the fishing would not likely result in JAM.

“Scoping brings out ideas that help shape what comes through the process,” said Jim Balsiger, Administrator for the Alaska Region of NOAA Fisheries. “I hope people take time to send us their written comments, including potential impacts and alternatives that should be considered in revising the Steller sea lion protection measures.”

NOAA Fisheries intends to work with stakeholders to develop fisheries restrictions that are not likely to result in JAM and minimize the potential economic impact on the fishing industry to the extent practicable while meeting the requirements of the ESA.

In scoping for the EIS, the agency will accept written comments from the public to determine the issues of concern; the appropriate range of management alternatives; and the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts. Instructions for submitting written comments and more detail can be found on the NOAA Fisheries Alaska Region Web site at: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/sslpm/>.

The formal public scoping period will close October 15, 2012.

NOAA, in coordination with the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, will conduct public meeting(s) to inform the public of the proposed action and alternatives, present issues and potential impacts, and gather public comment. These meetings will be announced by notice in the Federal Register and on the website at <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/npfmc/>.

Additional information, and the 2010 environmental assessment and biological opinion prepared for the Steller sea lion protection measures, are also available at <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/sslpm/>.

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