

'No jeopardy' to steller sea lions from proposed fishery management changes

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Researchers observing Steller sea lions. Credit: Russ Andrews, Alaska SeaLife Center and UAF

Proposed changes to fishing restrictions in the Aleutian Islands are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the endangered western population of Steller sea lions or adversely modify Steller sea lion critical habitat, according to a biological opinion issued today by NOAA Fisheries under the Endangered Species Act.

The agency estimates that the proposed fishery management changes would relieve roughly two-thirds of the economic burden imposed on Aleutian Islands' fishermen by sea lion protection measures that took effect in 2011. Fishermen could see new regulations in place by January 2015.

"Finding a way to protect endangered sea lions while minimizing costs to the fishing industry is a real challenge," said Jim Balsiger, NOAA Fisheries Alaska regional administrator. "I applaud the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and stakeholders for recommending a new suite of measures that effectively balances those two objectives."

The agency's last biological opinion on the effects of [fisheries](#), issued in 2010, found that the ongoing groundfish fisheries in the western and central Aleutian Islands were likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Steller sea lions and adversely modify their [critical habitat](#). This led NOAA Fisheries to develop a "Reasonable and Prudent Alternative" under the ESA, which closed the Atka mackerel and Pacific cod fisheries in the western Aleutians in 2011, and further restricted these fisheries in the central Aleutians.

The 2010 opinion underwent two external reviews—one commissioned by NOAA and undertaken by the Center for Independent Experts, and a second provided by the states of Alaska and Washington. NOAA Fisheries conducted several new analyses in response to the reviews, which are incorporated into the new 2014 opinion.

The new biological opinion was developed based on the best available scientific information and notes that considerable changes have occurred in the Aleutian Islands fisheries, coupled with new data and analyses that help give the agency a better picture of the potential for commercial fisheries to compete with sea lions for Pacific cod, Atka mackerel and pollock.

Beginning in 2014, NOAA and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council split the total allowable catch for Pacific cod between the Bering Sea fishing grounds and the Aleutian Islands, resulting in far less allowable Pacific cod harvest in the Aleutians. Additional changes that are being considered would limit the amount, timing and location of

Atka mackerel, Pacific cod and pollock harvests inside Steller sea lion critical habitat in the Aleutians.

NOAA Fisheries remains concerned that large fishery harvests from important areas in the Aleutians over a short amount of time has the potential to deplete concentrations of fish that Steller sea lions depend upon. However, the proposed measures would limit and spread out the catch enough to meet the requirements of the Endangered Species Act, and are consistent with NOAA Fisheries' views on dispersing the harvest in space and time to avoid localized depletion of fish that are prey species for Steller [sea lions](#).

NOAA Fisheries is completing an environmental impact statement on the new [fishery management](#) measures, and expects to implement the new regulations in January 2015.

More information: The biological opinion paper is available online: [alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/prote ... iop/2014/default.htm](http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/prote...iop/2014/default.htm)

Provided by NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service

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