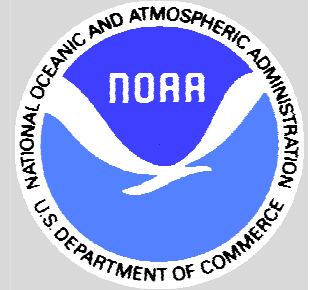


Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research

Environmental Impact Statement

NOAA-National Marine Fisheries Service

January 2006



This newsletter is the first in a series of newsletters regarding the Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). It is being mailed to federal, state, and local agencies; elected and appointed officials; Alaska Native groups; other interested organizations; and individual citizens within or adjacent to the project study area to inform people about the study process and to solicit comments. This and subsequent newsletters can be found on the project website <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/steller.htm>.

Scoping Notice

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) is preparing an EIS to analyze the potential environmental impacts of administering its grant and permit programs for Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*) and northern fur seals (*Callorhinus ursinus*). The purpose of this newsletter is to invite you to participate in the planning process and provide some background information on both the project area and the process of preparing an EIS.

The scoping process provides persons affected by the project an opportunity to express their views and concerns. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA; 42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*) defines scoping as an "early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action" (40 CFR 1501.7). The objectives of the scoping process are to:

- identify potentially interested parties
- identify public and agency concerns regarding research
- define the range of alternatives that will be examined in the EIS
- ensure that relevant issues are identified early and drive the analyses
- establish a public record

Project Description

NOAA Fisheries Service is the federal agency responsible for the management, conservation and protection of living marine resources within the United States' (U.S.) Exclusive Economic Zone (marine water from 3-200 miles offshore).

NOAA Fisheries Service currently administers grant monies that have been designated by Congress and allocated within NOAA Fisheries Service's annual budget for the purpose of facilitating research on Steller sea lions and northern fur seals. The act of awarding grants is a federal action requiring NEPA compliance. Similarly, issuance of permits for research activities on marine mammals is a federal action requiring NEPA compliance. These permits are issued pursuant to the provisions of the Endangered Species Act (ESA; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA; 16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*), and regulations implementing these statutes. This EIS would satisfy the NEPA compliance requirements for awarding grants and issuing permits for research on Steller sea lions and northern fur seals. NOAA Fisheries Service awards grants and issues permits to qualified individuals and institutions so they can conduct research activities likely to result in collection of information needed by NOAA Fisheries Service to conserve and recover the populations of Steller sea lions and northern fur seals.

The need for this action is to facilitate research to: 1) prevent harm and avoid jeopardy or disadvantage to the species; 2) promote recovery; 3) identify factors limiting the population; 4) identify reasonable actions to minimize impacts of human-induced activities; 5) implement conservation and management measures; and 6) make data and results available in a timely manner for management of the species. As part of this action, NOAA Fisheries Service will evaluate measures that will improve efficiency and avoid unnecessary redundancy in Steller sea lion and northern fur seal research, utilize best management practices, facilitate adaptive management, and standardize research protocols.

The project area includes the entire range of Steller sea lions and northern fur seals in U.S. waters and on the high seas, which includes parts of Alaska, Washington, Oregon, and California (See Figures 1 and 2).

Why is an EIS needed?

Issuance of permits for scientific research on marine mammals is generally categorically excluded from NEPA requirements to prepare an environmental assessment (EA) or EIS (NOAA Administrative Order [NAO] 216-6). However, when the activities that would be authorized in a scientific research permit would involve a geographic area with unique characteristics, are the subject of public controversy based on potential environmental impacts, have uncertain environmental impacts or unique or unknown risks, would establish a precedent or decision in principle about future proposals, may result in cumulatively significant impacts, or may have any adverse effects upon endangered or threatened species or their habitats, the preparation of an EA or EIS is required. This EIS will assess the likely environmental and socioeconomic effects of funding and permitting research under a range of alternatives and will address compliance of the alternatives with the ESA, MMPA, and other applicable laws. An EIS serves several purposes. The process of preparing an EIS:

- identifies planning issues and concerns
- identifies the purpose and need for the proposed action
- develops and evaluates reasonable alternatives for the proposed action
- describes the affected environment
- assesses potential environmental consequences of alternatives

The Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research EIS will satisfy the requirements of CEQ regulations and NAO 216-6 for those federal permits allowing research or federal grants funding research that may have impacts on Steller sea lions and northern fur seals throughout their range in U.S. waters. The EIS will consist of a programmatic analysis, covering expected and projected federally granted and permitted research projects for future years, until such time that a revision of the programmatic document is deemed necessary.

Preparation of the Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research EIS will provide the public an opportunity to:

- understand the requirements for planning and NEPA compliance
- make recommendations on how research should be conducted

- review decision-making options for research grant funding by NMFS

Steps in the Planning Process

The EIS process, currently scheduled for completion in two years (2007), has nine basic steps:

1. Federal Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS
2. public scoping period
3. develop and analyze alternatives
4. prepare and distribute Draft EIS
5. public comment review and synthesis
6. response to comments and revisions to EIS
7. select the preferred alternative
8. prepare and distribute Final EIS
9. issue Record of Decision

The range, or scope, of public and agency issues and concerns are being identified through comments received in response to this notice and during upcoming public scoping meetings listed in this newsletter. NOAA Fisheries Service welcomes your thoughts and ideas on the grant and permit process and the development of alternatives to be addressed in the EIS process.

A range of reasonable alternatives, including an alternative considering no action, as required by NEPA, will be developed and analyzed in the EIS. The alternatives must address the requirements of NEPA as well as the legal, regulatory, and budgetary parameters that govern the research. Through scoping and subsequent discussions, the public will assist in developing the alternatives to be addressed in the EIS process.

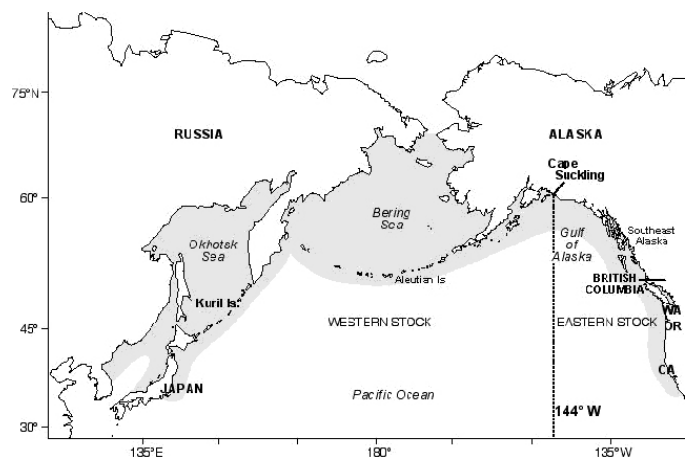


Figure 1. Steller Sea Lion Distribution

The potential impacts of the alternatives will be assessed and the results of the analyses will be documented in the Draft EIS, which the public will have an opportunity to review. Comments on the Draft EIS received from agencies and the public will be considered and incorporated, as applicable, into the Final EIS.

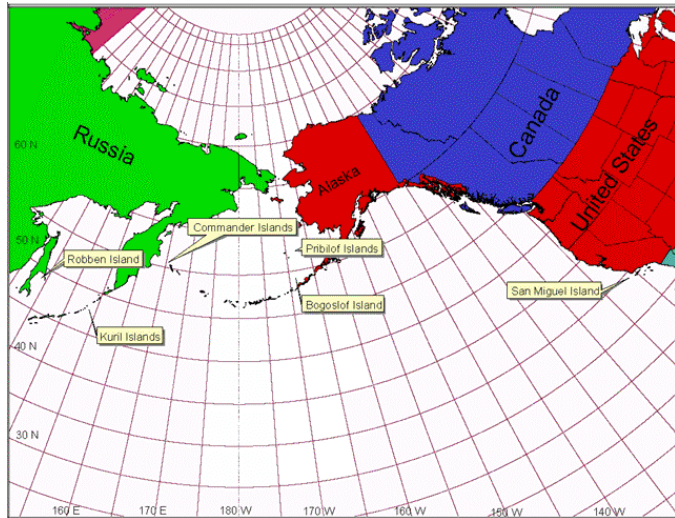


Figure 2. Northern Fur Seal Breeding Sites

What preliminary factors will be evaluated in the EIS?

The following factors were identified for evaluation in the EIS. Additional issues identified through the scoping process will be analyzed and considered in the EIS.

- Types of Research Needed
- Level and Effectiveness of Research Effort
- Coordination and Monitoring of Research
- Qualifications of Researchers
- Effects of Research on Marine Mammals
- Alternative Methods for Research

How can you participate in the project?

Public Scoping Meetings: Listening to the Public

There are several opportunities to participate in the Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research EIS process. Three public scoping meetings will be held to present information to the public and obtain input. The scoping meetings will combine an informational open house with a brief presentation that provides an overview of the plan purpose, objectives, and schedule. A question, answer, and comment session will take place after the formal presentation towards the end of the meeting.

The public scoping comment period will be open until February 25, 2006. Comments may be submitted by e-mail, fax, or by letter to the address provided at the end of this newsletter. Details for the public scoping meetings are provided below, and will be announced through media releases and the project web page at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/steller.htm>.

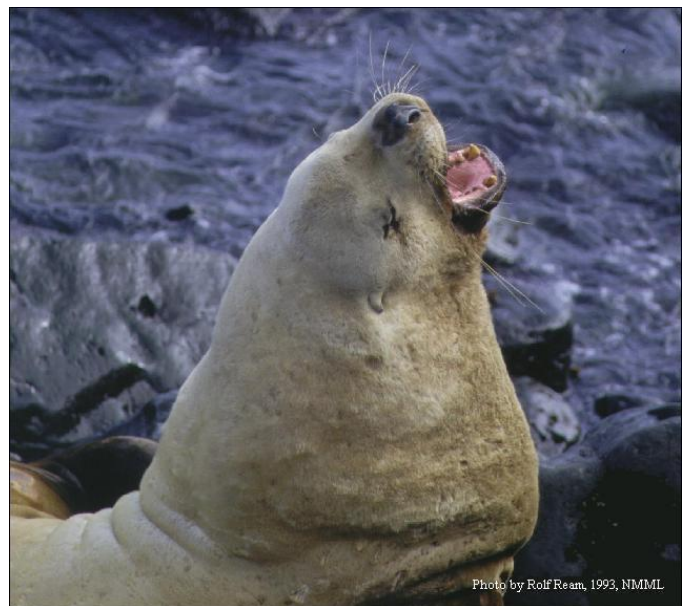
Your comments are important to us, particularly at this early stage of the process.



Northern Fur Seals

Other Avenues for Public Involvement

The preaddressed comment form accompanying this newsletter can be used to submit written comments at any time during the scoping period, until February 25, 2006. Comments received from the public during scoping will be reviewed and incorporated, as applicable, into developing the EIS.



Steller Sea Lion

Photo by Rolf Ream, 1993, NMML

Once the Draft EIS is complete, the document will be released to the public to review for a period of 90 days. During the review period, NOAA Fisheries Service will conduct public hearings to accept comments on the Draft EIS document. Public testimony, written or faxed comments, and e-mailed comments will be accepted during this period. NOAA Fisheries Service will maintain a mailing list throughout the process. Informational materials will be distributed to those on the mailing list. A project website will be maintained and updated at

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/steller.htm> throughout the course of the project.

PUBLIC SCOPING MEETINGS Please Attend!		
Silver Spring, Maryland January 18, 2006	Seattle, Washington January 20, 2006	Anchorage, Alaska January 23, 2006

We encourage you to take an active part in the Steller Sea Lion and Northern Fur Seal Research EIS project. The purpose of this newsletter is to keep you informed and to allow you every opportunity to voice your opinion regarding this important project. If you require more information about the project, have any questions, or are interested in being added to (or removed from) the mailing list please contact the NOAA Fisheries Service Project Manager for the EIS at the fax or email address below. Please submit your written comments regarding the scope of the EIS to Steve Leathery, Chief, Permits, Conservation and Education Division at:

Contact information:



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