



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

National Marine Fisheries Service

P.O. Box 21668

Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

November 3, 2003

Cleve Cowles, Ph.D.
United States Department of the Interior
Mineral Management Service
Alaska Outer Continental Shelf Region
949 East 36th Avenue, Suite 300
Anchorage, Alaska 99508-4363

Dear Dr. Cowles,

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has reviewed the Final FY 2004, Alaska Outer Continental Shelf Region, Annual Studies Plan. NMFS appreciates the Minerals Management Service (MMS) including a study on beluga whales in Lower Cook Inlet in the study package. Additionally, in your cover letter MMS requested any comments or suggestions NMFS has for studies in FY 2005.

Currently the area which has the greatest interest for oil and gas exploration and production is in the Beaufort Sea Planning Area. Although numerous fisheries studies have been conducted in this planning area, there are still a great number of unknowns concerning fishery resources under the jurisdiction of NMFS. To date, most fisheries studies have focused on the nearshore coastal environment. Data on fish species and relative abundance on the Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) is limited. As a result, it will be difficult to assess the impact of oil and gas development on the OCS in future lease sales. Therefore, NMFS suggests that funding a comprehensive fish survey on the OCS of the Beaufort Sea would be beneficial and would support more informed decision making.

NMFS has jurisdiction over salmon which use the OCS for rearing. Most of these fish probably originate in the fresh waters of the North Slope. Little is known about salmon populations on the North Slope. However, salmon populations on the North Slope could expand if the recent trend of mild winters continues. Salmon are considered important by subsistence users on the North Slope. There are no recent estimates on the extent of subsistence use of salmon. It would be beneficial to document subsistence use of salmon and the river systems where the salmon are most abundant.

NMFS hopes these suggestions will be helpful in developing future studies and NMFS looks forward to working with MMS in development of these and other plans.

Sincerely,

for

James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region

