

SSLMC Objectives

1. Continue to avoid jeopardy and adverse modification.

- Is there additional fishing effort inside of SSL critical habitat?
The STGTC proposal will reduce trawling effort within 20nm of Dalnoi Point.
- Does the proposal provide trade-offs that reduce the total negative effects to SSL?
The STGTC proposal provides additional protection to critical habitat for the northern most range of the western stock of SSL. There are no foreseeable negative effects of the proposal for SSL.
- Does the proposal open a substantial amount of critical habitat?
No, we are proposing additional protections to critical habitat. The St. George Traditional Council proposal requests that the current 0-3 nautical mile trawl closure be extended to prohibit groundfish trawling within 0-20 nautical miles of this haulout.
- Does the proposal indirectly provide protection to additional sites?
Yes, through our proposal we are providing additional protection for South, which is a designated SSL haul-out site under the ESA. The SGTC has also documented SSL hauling out at Murre Rock, Staraya Artil, Sea Lion Rock (St. George), East Cliffs, Kitasilox and Tolstoi Point. Notable among these sites is Kitasilox which frequently has 50-100 SSL hauled out during the fall. SSL at all these sites would benefit from the protection provided by a 20nm no trawl zone around Dalnoi Point.
- Does proposal indirectly affect nearby SSL sites?
Yes, the proposal provides additional protection for other nearby SSL sites. Increased protection for Dalnoi Point will also protect fall and winter foraging habitat of female SSL with dependent offspring from the Walrus Island Rookery. Females with dependent pups and juveniles are regularly observed at Dalnoi Point, Tolstoi Point and Kitasilox haulouts, Steller sea lion pups usually remain within 500 km of their natal site during their first year.¹ Given the geographical isolation of the Pribilof Archipelago, the Dalnoi Point haulout is clearly an important site for the Pribilof population during winter and thereby requires additional protection measures.
- Does the proposal affect important research site? (e.g. Chiswell)
NMFS does not currently conduct any consistent SSL research or monitoring activities at this or any other Pribilof Island SSL site. However, a community-based research program was initiated in 2005 on St. George Island. We are currently gathering data from Dalnoi Point and all other SSL haulouts on St. George Island using time-lapse cameras provided by the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation under a grant from NOAA. We have also used a Seemore Wildlife Systems remote video system similar to that used by the Alaska Sea Life Center at Chiswell Island to collect abundance and behavioral information at the Dalnoi Point site. Census counts and brand resight data are collected and shared with NMFS. Our intention is to continue to collect this information as a part of our long-term monitoring program. As the Bering Sea climate

¹ Raum-Suryan, K.L., Pitcher, K.W., Calkins, D.G. Sease, J.L., and Loughlin, T.R. 2002. Dispersal, rookery fidelity, and metapopulation structure of Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*) in an increasing and decreasing population in Alaska. *Marine Mammal Science* 18:746-764.

changes, data for this northern haulout area could be important to assess distribution shifts in SSL populations.

- Does proposal offer additional measures to control fishing rate or effort?
Our proposal will move the current trawling effort outside 20 nm of Daloni Point. Based on the catch analysis presented by the NMFS in the 2003 Supplement to the 2001 SSL BiOp², we determine that implementation of the SGTC proposal will dramatically reduce the target species removals in St. George critical habitat.
- Does the proposal affect an SSL site that has special importance? (e.g. Marmot)
To answer this question it is important to define “special importance”. As stated above, NMFS does not provide any consistent research effort at this site or any known site this far north. From a local information gathering perspective, our proposal does. We have initiated a long-term monitoring program at Dalnoi Point and other sites using time-lapse cameras and have also used live video feed to gather information. Total population estimates as well as brand data are collected and shared with NMFS.

We also believe that the Pribilof Islands qualify as a SSL site of special importance in Alaska. In particular, St. George Island has long had many traditional haul locations out for Steller Sea lions. Elliott³ reported that in the 1870s approximately 10,000 to 12,000 sea lions were distributed at rookeries on both St. Paul and St. George Islands. Sea lion numbers were dramatically reduced by hunting and culling to decrease competition with northern fur seals during the commercial harvest era. Breeding rookeries on St. George Island were considered extinct by 1916⁴. At Walrus Island, the only remaining breeding colony in the Pribilof Islands, the number of pups born has declined from 2,866 in 1960 to just 29 pups in 2005^{4,5}. By protecting the foraging habitat for females and pups from Walrus Island we may help to prevent the extinction of the last remaining breeding rookery in the Pribilof Islands.

- Does the proposal reduce the no-fishing time between end of year (December) and first of year (January) fisheries at a critical time for SSL?
Our proposal does not affect the no-fishing time.
- Does proposal shift effort into a time/space or prey availability level that may have negative effect on SSL?
We are proposing to increase the protection of Steller sea lions critical habitat. In the PRT, 20 nm is the maximum level of protection for an SSL site. Our proposal will shift some effort outside of the 20 mile radius around Dalnoi Point. Due to the location of the adjoining Pribilof Habitat Conservation Area it is highly unlikely that the SGTC proposal could have a negative impact on any other Pribilof Island SSL site.

² NMFS. 2003. Supplement to the 2001 Endangered Species Act, Section 7 Consultation, Biological Opinion and Incidental Take Statement on the authorization of the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska Groundfish Fishery Management Plan Amendments 61 and 70. NMFS Alaska Region, Protected Resources Division, Juneau, AK.

³ Elliott, Henry W. 1881. The Seal-Islands of Alaska. Washington, Government Printing Office. 176p.

⁴ Loughlin, T. R., D. J. Rugh, and C. H. Fiscus. 1984. Northern sea lion distribution and abundance: 1956-80. J. Wildl. Manage. 48:729-740.

⁵ National Marine Fisheries Service unpublished data.

- Does the proposal affect the number of fishing days required to harvest the quota?
No.

2. Encourage development of a sound experimental design for monitoring.

As stated above, a community-based research program was initiated in 2005 to monitor the abundance, behavior and life history of SSL at St. George Island. During 2007, remote video and time-lapse photography were successfully used to collect data at Dalnoi Point and other haul-outs. The SGTC was able to document three significant findings: 1) counts of over 400 sea lions were regularly recorded at Dalnoi Point from January through April, clearly establishing this site as one of the largest winter haul-outs in western Alaska; 2) consistent wintertime observations of female sea lions nursing their young were made, indicating that Dalnoi Point is important during a crucial period for the survival of young sea lions; and 3) observations of branded sea lions from SE Alaska, the Gulf of Alaska, the Aleutian Islands and Russia, show that Dalnoi Point is utilized by Steller sea lions from throughout the species northern range during the winter. In summary, this project allowed community researchers to use cutting edge technology to collect detailed scientific data that substantiates local knowledge of endangered Steller sea lions.

Our intention is to continue to collect and share this information as a part of our long-term monitoring program. Our existing research program and technical capacity will allow us to monitor the local population to evaluate the effect of the proposed changes to SSL critical habitat. In addition, Dalnoi Point and other Pribilof sites can provide important data to assess distribution shifts in SSL populations in response to climate change. The Pribilof Islands play an important role in the NPRB Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Project and have also received NPRB funding to monitor near-shore oceanographic conditions (temperature and salinity) on each island as part of the Pribilof Islands Community-Based Ocean Monitoring Program (PICBOMP).

3. Minimize adverse social and economic impacts.

- Does the proposal provide economic benefits?
It might increase the total amount of CDQ halibut fish caught near-shore, though this cannot be assessed until current regulations are changed.
- What is the impact upon harvesting and/or processing efficiency?
There are no negative impacts on harvesting or processing efficiency. Increasing the size of the Dalnoi Point critical habitat area will likely have very little impact on the fishery practices near St. George. Pollock catch in 2002 in the 0-10 nautical mile zone of St. George Island CH amounted to 0.2% of the EBS pollock total catch.² If current catch rates resemble those of 2002, only a relatively low level of fishing relative to the overall EBS catch needs to be displaced in order to dramatically improve the protection of critical habitat in the Pribilof Islands and establish SSL protection measures comparable to those established for the rest of the Western DPS.
- Does the proposal have any effects on other fisheries?
Our proposal will move trawling effort outside 20nm of Dalnoi Point critical habitat.
- Will the proposed action be further affected by recent or pending council actions?
Not to our knowledge.

4. Minimize bycatch of PSC and other groundfish.

- Does the proposal potentially create bycatch issues in other SSL prey species?
Our proposal has the potential to reduce bycatch within 20nm of Dalnoi Point. To the extent that the proposal extends to the edge of the Pribilof Canyon area it may reduce bycatch of squid which has been increasing in recent years.
- Does the proposal potentially create bycatch issues in PSC species?
The proposal does not create any bycatch issues for PSC species.

5. Promote safety at sea.

- Does the proposal reduce or increase safety for the fleet?
The proposal may increase the safety of the Pribilof Islands halibut fleet.

6. Minimize adverse impacts to threatened and endangered species in the BSAI and GOA
The proposal will minimize the overall negative impact to the northern most range of the Western stock of Steller sea lions.