



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE ESTABLISHES CRITICAL MARINE PROTECTED AREA IN ALASKA

NOAA Fisheries Service formally established the Aleutian Islands Habitat Conservation Area in Alaska today, which covers 279,114 square nautical miles. These historic conservation measures follow close on the heels of last month's announcement by NOAA Fisheries Service of similar habitat protection measures implemented off the coast of Washington, Oregon and California. Also, the President recently designated the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a national monument. Through NOAA and its federal partners, this administration has protected millions of acres of critical habitat in the U.S.

"All of these measures complement a successful fishery management strategy put forward by the U.S. Ocean Action Plan that has been highlighted by many parties," said NOAA Administrator Conrad C. Lautenbacher. "This strategy incorporates conservative harvest restrictions, marine protected areas, limits on bycatch, rigorous monitoring, and strong scientific research programs."

In an effort to protect critically important fish habitat, NOAA Fisheries Service worked with partners to develop a plan to restrict fishing activities that can destroy sensitive habitats on the ocean floor. Designating the area as a habitat conservation area makes this plan a reality.

"NOAA Fisheries Service is pleased to be able to set aside this important part of our country's oceans to protect habitat that supports extremely valuable fisheries," said NOAA Fisheries Service Director Dr. Bill Hogarth. "This is a win-win situation for everybody concerned, and especially for future generations."

Resulting from a February 2005 recommendation by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, the Aleutian Islands Conservation Area establishes a network of fishing closures in the Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska. The area protects habitat for cold water corals and other sensitive features that are slow to recover once disturbed by fishing gear or other activities.

"NOAA Fisheries Service worked closely with environmental groups, the commercial fishing industry, the fishery management council and other partners to develop these unprecedented protections," Hogarth said. "This incredible area of the ocean is huge, and it's a critical piece in the Alaska marine ecosystem."

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Although most of the Aleutian Islands fishery management area will be closed to bottom trawling, specific sites that have been trawled repeatedly in the past will remain open. The fragile coral gardens discovered by NOAA Fisheries Service scientists in 2002 can now be protected. Six small areas that include sensitive "coral gardens" will be closed to all bottom-contact fishing gear, including trawls, pots and dredges. Research indicates that the Aleutian Islands may harbor one of the highest diversity of deep-water corals in the world, with at least 25 species or subspecies believed to be endemic to the archipelago.

In the Gulf of Alaska, ten areas along the continental slope will be closed to bottom trawling to protect hard-bottom habitats that may be important to rockfish. In southeast Alaska, in the Fairweather Grounds and off Cape Ommaney, five small areas will be closed to all bottom contact fishing gear to protect dense thickets of red tree corals. Another fifteen areas offshore will also be closed to all bottom contact fishing gear to protect unique seamount habitats.

In 2007 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and more than 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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On the Web:

Alaska Region NOAA Fisheries website at: www.fakr.noaa.gov/habitat/efh.htm

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

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