

How much would you pay to protect sea lions?

LAINE WELCH
FISHERIES

(Published: September 9, 2006)

KODIAK -- How much do Americans living in say, Iowa, care about endangered populations of Steller sea lions in Alaska -- and how much would they be willing to pay, perhaps in higher taxes, to protect them? A survey by federal fisheries economists aims to find out, and it could be used to help shape future protection for the marine mammals.

A notice last month in the Federal Register advised that a random survey of 2,400 Americans would be used to measure preferences toward protecting sea lions in Alaska. It read: "Since different options are available, it is important to understand the public's attitudes about possible impacts on the sea lions, Alaska's fisheries, communities and the nation. ... This information is not currently available, yet it is crucial to ensure the efficient management of sea lions and Alaskan fisheries."

The thought that opinions by far away folks might drive fishery management policies had Alaska's industry quaking in its Xtra-Tuffs. A patchwork of sea lion protective measures imposed several years ago has shuffled fishing grounds and seasons, and continues to cause economic hardship on fishermen and communities.

Not to worry, said economists at the Seattle-based Alaska Fisheries Science Center, who hastened to add that a clarification will be made to the Federal Register notice due to "confusion of the purpose and scope of the project."

"We are not trying to evaluate how the public feels about particular management options and protection scenarios. The project is focused on different rebuilding and recovery outcomes for Steller sea lions and how they would feel about those outcomes ... how they value those outcomes," explained economist Rob Felthoven.

"For example, is it more important to people that we achieve a certain increase in the population size versus a certain endangered species listing status? We want to understand the types of trade-offs people might make," said economist Dan Lew.

"It's a branch of economics that tries to understand nonmarket values that people place on things they don't go out and buy," added division director Pat Livingston.

A number of previous economic studies have tried to value threatened and endangered species on land, but few have been done on marine mammals. The most recent survey in 2001 revealed that a random sample of 297 Florida households would donate an average of \$10.25 to a fund to protect endangered manatees if government protection was removed.

An earlier survey asked California households how much they would be willing to pay into a fund to increase gray whale populations by 50 percent and 100 percent. (The responses averaged \$16.18 and \$18.14 per year, respectively, in 1992 dollars).

"Federal agencies have a mandate that requires we consider the costs and benefits associated with regulatory actions," Felthoven said.

The public is also invited to comment on whether the collection of the Steller sea lion survey information is necessary and useful, and to suggest ways the process might be improved. Deadline to comment to NOAA Fisheries is Oct. 16.

- Fishing futures. Coastal communities face an uncertain future as fishing rights are privatized and restructured. A two-day conference this month will offer strategies to make sure fishing remains as a vibrant sector throughout Alaska.

"The idea is to be forward looking, to think about the planning we need to do now so our next generations will have fishing as an economic opportunity," said Paula Cullenberg, a marine advisory agent with Alaska Sea Grant, a sponsor of the event.

Cullenberg added that the conference is not academic or political, and is designed to appeal to any coastal community residents. "Everyone recognizes the answers are not the same in Petersburg or Bethel or Koliganek. Every community is different and in a lot of ways we're isolated from each other. Sometimes it's nice to just sit with people from other parts of the state or the country or the world and share ideas that spark creativity and you can take them back to your community," she said.

The Harvesting the Future conference takes place Sept. 21-22 at the Hilton Anchorage. For more information, contact Sherri Pristash at 907-474-6701 or fyconf@uaf.edu, or go to www.alaskaseagrant.org.

- Fish bill postponed. Congress on Friday delayed any action on reauthorizing the nation's top fisheries bill -- the Magnuson Stevens Act -- until after the Nov. 2 elections.

Laine Welch is a Kodiak-based fisheries journalist. Her Fish Radio programs can be heard on stations around the state. Her information column appears every other Saturday. This material is protected by copyright. For information on reprinting or placing on your Web site or newsletter, contact msfish@alaska.com.

Print Page

Close Window

Copyright © 2006 The Anchorage Daily News (www.adn.com)