



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

*National Marine Fisheries Service*

*P.O. Box 21668*

*Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668*

November 21, 2006

Ms. Stephanie Madsen, Chair  
North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
605 West 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 306  
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2252

Dear Stephanie,

We would like to update the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) on the status of the Fishery Management Plan level biological opinion (BiOp) for the Alaska groundfish fisheries. At your request, we provided the Council a partial draft BiOp prior to its October 2006 meeting. The complete draft of this new BiOp will examine and synthesize over five years and \$100M of new information on both published and unpublished literature. While the agency had originally intended for a complete draft to be available by December 2006, the scale of this effort, as well as limited staff resources, has caused us to re-evaluate that timeline. The agency now expects that a complete draft BiOp will be available to the Council by June 1, 2007. We also intend to schedule an independent peer review of the draft BiOp between June and October 2007.

The June 1 schedule for the draft BiOp would allow the Steller Sea Lion Mitigation Committee to review the document and develop any revisions to existing protection measures before the October 2007 Council meeting. In October, the Council could consider the peer review results, as well as SSC, AP, and public comments on the draft BiOp during Council consideration of proposed changes to the Steller sea lion protection measures. A preliminary preferred alternative for changes could be selected in December 2007, which then could be identified in the draft environmental analysis and considered in the final BiOp during early 2008. Final Council action on any changes to the Steller sea lion protection measures may be possible by April 2008, depending on the nature of the environmental analysis and any revisions to the draft BiOp that would be required. Implementation of any changes likely would occur in early 2009.

We acknowledge that the Council has expressed interest in our finalization of the Recovery Plan prior to completion of the BiOp. However, given our limited resources, we intend to first finalize the BiOp and then proceed to finalize the draft Recovery Plan.



We recognize the dedication and cooperation of the Council in maintaining priority attention to new information concerning the status of Steller sea lions. We also recognize that the schedule for completing the BiOp has been delayed several times over the past year. Nonetheless, we believe that the June 1 delivery date for the draft BiOp is necessary given the scope of the project and time required for internal agency review of the draft document. We appreciate your ongoing support during this consultation process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert D. Mecum". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Robert D. Mecum  
Acting Administrator, Alaska Region

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