

State-Federal-Council Meeting on Ocean Ecosystem Issues

Birch/Willow Room, Hilton Hotel, Anchorage, AK
November 16, 2005 1-5pm

Draft Agenda

Welcome and Introductions

Overview

- How did we get here?
- An Ecosystem Approach to Management, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy report, and the President's U.S. Ocean Action Plan
- What is the purpose of an Ecosystem Forum, and how might it be structured and operate?

Discussion

- Is there interest in greater federal-state-Council collaboration on marine ecosystem issues?
- Specific thoughts regarding the Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum proposal?
- Other issues or concerns?

Next Steps

- How do we move forward?
- Reaction to the sample issues for further collaboration? What are other issues that an Ecosystem Forum might address?

Proposal for an Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum

Background

The President's U.S. Ocean Action Plan calls for a more systematic collaboration and better integration of federal agency actions that affect ocean-related matters. The Bush Administration is working towards an ecosystem-based management approach to address regional ocean resource issues based on improved federal coordination and governance in collaboration with state and local officials. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council recognizes that its decisions regarding fisheries could be affected both positively and negatively by the actions of other entities, and vice versa. Accordingly, the North Pacific Fishery Management Council voted in June 2005 to explore the feasibility of an Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum (AIEF) or some similar mechanism for collaboration amongst the governmental bodies involved in Aleutian Islands ocean-related activities.

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council, the State of Alaska, and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service are discussing the idea of co-hosting a public workshop to develop the specifics of such an ecosystem-based management approach for coastal and ocean issues in the Aleutian Island region. The workshop will explore the purposes, role, responsibilities, and composition of an AIEF or similar forum for collaboration, as well as potential first topics that such a group might address. The meeting on November 16th would serve as a precursory discussion prior to a public workshop.

Purpose, Role, and Responsibilities of an Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum

The following text is a "strawman" description of the purpose, role, and responsibilities of an AIEF. The ideas reflected herein should be discussed, debated, and improved upon as appropriate during the meeting and workshop.

The AIEF would be comprised of one representative from the Council and one representative from each local, state, and federal governmental agency with jurisdiction over activities that directly affect the Aleutian Islands ecosystem. The AIEF would serve as a forum for coordination and collaboration, and would not have any independent jurisdiction or authority. The primary purpose of the AIEF would be to enhance coordination in support of the sustainable management and use of the Aleutian Islands ecosystem.

The role of the AIEF would be to provide an efficient forum for sharing information about human activities and natural processes affecting the Aleutian Islands ecosystem. The AIEF would promote open communication between government agencies, the Council, and Aleutian Islands residents and other stakeholders. The objective of this information sharing and open communication would be to encourage the entities with appropriate jurisdiction to make well informed decisions that support sustainable natural resource management. For example, decisions about shipping lanes and marine transportation should account for potential effects on marine mammal populations, and decisions about fishery management should account for potential effects on seabird colonies. In the absence of effective coordination, an agency or Council with jurisdiction over a specific activity might make decisions that do not fully consider indirect consequences for other components of the ecosystem.

The AIEF would have no independent jurisdiction or authority, so it would not regulate any activity and no agency or Council would be required to obtain AIEF approval before acting. Each entity participating in the AIEF would be responsible for working in good faith to share pertinent information with other AIEF participants. The primary responsibilities of the AIEF would be to consider relevant information; facilitate open discussion of ways to resolve potential conflicts between competing uses of the Aleutian Islands ecosystem; and potentially develop consensus positions, if appropriate, to advise governmental bodies regarding the collective views of the entities participating in the AIEF. If the AIEF chooses to develop consensus positions and to advise

the federal government regarding those positions, the AIEF would likely first have to obtain a charter under the Federal Advisory Committees Act. In cases where the AIEF discusses an issue but reaches no consensus, the AIEF would take no position. No agency would be bound by any position taken by the AIEF – such positions would merely represent advice for consideration by the entities with appropriate jurisdiction.

Issues that May be Addressed by the Ecosystem Forum

A sample of issues which agencies may wish to address in an ecosystem forum is provided below.

- User conflicts

The Aleutian Islands ecosystem supports a wide variety of human uses: fisheries, shipping, national defense, tourism, etc. Could an “Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum” identify existing or potential user conflicts and opportunities to minimize such conflicts?

- Great Circle shipping route, oil spill risk/preparedness

Trans-Pacific ships travel along the shortest route between Asia and North America, commonly referred to as the Great Circle Route. After the Selendang Ayu grounding on Unalaska Island, Governor Murkowski asked the U.S. Coast Guard to lead an effort to assess the risk posed by the international North Pacific shipping lanes to the Aleutian Islands in collaboration with the State. The assessment will need to determine future casualty and spill prevention measures to reduce the possibility of ecological damage in the Aleutian Islands. In addition to the U.S. Coast Guard and the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, there are a number of other federal and state agencies with responsibilities for managing ocean and coastal resources that can be affected by ship groundings. Could the Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum facilitate the open discussion and synthesis of agency positions on appropriate alternatives to assess and reduce the risk of shipping accidents in the Aleutians groundings?

- ESA-listed species

Critical habitat for Steller sea lions in the Aleutian Islands is primarily located in the State’s three mile territorial waters. These areas are closed to commercial fisheries, and re-opening to fishing may trigger an ESA Section 7 consultation and closure of other commercial fishing areas as a form of mitigation. Sea otters in the Aleutians were recently listed as threatened under ESA, but cause of decline is currently unknown. North Pacific right whale critical habitat is undergoing designation and may interact with shipping routes. Could an “Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum” provide an appropriate venue for discussion of these issues as they pertain to the larger ecosystem-based management?

- Human and fishery health risk around Amchitka Island

Amchitka Island was the site of three underground nuclear tests between 1965 and 1971. Radionuclides will leak from the island, but the timeframe for leakage is unknown. Radionuclides could contaminate a wide range of species, and could impact subsistence and commercial fisheries in the surrounding area. Consistent, long-term monitoring is needed to detect leakage. Could an “Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum” develop a plan to deal with the repercussions of eventual leakage?

- Living and non-living resource mapping, information collection, environmental quality monitoring, and research

A number of state and federal agencies are responsible for managing the use of the natural resources of the Aleutian Islands, and enforcing standards for the Aleutian Islands air, land and water quality. Accurate and reliable resource information is needed to support agency resource management and pollution control missions. Funds to collect and analyze resource information is limited and will never be sufficient acquire the data and apply the science needed to predict the outcomes of agency decisions with complete certainty. Resource data collection, monitoring, and research need to be targeted, cost-effective, and directed toward specific goals, objectives, and management priorities. Could an "Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum" help agencies identify, prioritize, and collaborate on environmental monitoring, scientific investigation, and applied research efforts?

- International resource management

The Aleutian Islands ecosystem borders international waters and the Russian Exclusive Economic Zone. Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) suspected to come from international sources have been found in fish and wildlife of the Aleutian Islands region. International transport of air contaminants (mercury and other POPs) with subsequent marine deposition of these contaminants needs to be quantified and better understood from an ecological system perspective. Could an "Aleutian Islands Ecosystem Forum" evaluate whether any activities outside of U.S. jurisdiction may adversely affect the Aleutian Islands ecosystem? And if so, could such a Forum bring pertinent issues to the attention of the U.S. Department of State for possible bilateral or multilateral discussions, as appropriate?

- Dutch Harbor wastewater

There are numerous issues with permitted wastewater dischargers in Dutch Harbor including the domestic wastewater facility and the multitude of seafood processors. There are several Clean Water Act Section 303(d) listed waters (polluted waters) near Dutch Harbor, with pollutants they include settleable solids, petroleum, oil and grease, and low dissolved oxygen. They are in various stages of waterbody recovery planning and recovery.