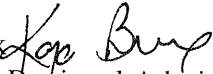





UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, Alaska 99802-1668

April 7, 2005

MEMORANDUM FOR: James W. Balsiger
Administrator, Alaska Region

THROUGH: Kaja Brix 
Assistant Regional Administrator for Protected Resources

FROM: 
Jonathan M. Kurland
Assistant Regional Administrator for Habitat Conservation

SUBJECT: Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation for Essential Fish
Habitat (EFH) Conservation Measures in the Aleutian Islands (AI)
and Gulf of Alaska (GOA)

The Habitat Conservation Division (HCD) is in the process of completing the *Final Environmental Impact Statement for Essential Fish Habitat Identification and Conservation in Alaska* (EIS). The EIS evaluates three actions: (1) describing and identifying EFH, (2) adopting an approach to identify Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPCs) within EFH, and (3) minimizing the adverse effects of fishing on EFH. HCD is also assisting the North Pacific Fishery Management Council staff with completion of a related Environmental Assessment (EA) for HAPCs. The EA evaluates the identification and management of HAPCs to protect various coral and seamount habitats. The preferred alternatives endorsed by the Council under both the EIS and the EA include new area closures and gear restrictions to reduce the potential adverse effects of fishing on sea floor habitats. I request your concurrence, pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, that adoption of these measures by the National Marine Fisheries Service is not likely to adversely affect threatened or endangered species.

Description of the Proposed Actions

The proposed measures for EFH and HAPCs would prohibit the use of certain bottom contact fishing gear in designated areas of the AI and GOA. The new measures are organized into five different management zones, as detailed below and summarized on the attached figures.

In the AI, bottom trawling would be allowed in designated open areas that support high fishing effort based on NMFS observer data from 1990 to 2001 and supplementary data analysis and fishing records from AI trawl fishermen. Bottom trawling would be prohibited in all remaining portions of the AI management area, and the resulting Aleutian Islands Habitat Conservation Area would encompass 279,114 km^2 . Pelagic trawls could be used outside of the designated open areas, but only in the off-bottom mode. Additionally, all bottom contact fishing would be prohibited in six Aleutian Islands Coral Habitat Protection Areas located off Semisopochnoi



Island, Bobrof Island, Cape Moffet, Great Siskin Island, Ulak Island, and Adak Canyon, totaling 110nm². Finally, two areas on Bowers Ridge and the Ulm Plateau totaling 5,286nm² would be closed to mobile bottom contact fishing gear, creating the Bowers Ridge Habitat Conservation Zone.

In the GOA, bottom trawling would be prohibited in ten Gulf of Alaska Slope Habitat Conservation Areas along the upper to intermediate slope (200 to 1,000m). The total area encompassed by these closures is 2,086nm². Additionally, four areas on the Fairweather Grounds and one area off Cape Ommany would comprise the Gulf of Alaska Coral Habitat Protection Areas. These areas, totalling 13.5 nm², would be closed to all bottom contact fishing gear.

Fifteen seamounts in the GOA and one in the AI (Bowers Seamount) would constitute the Alaska Seamount Habitat Protection Areas. Those areas would include 5,329nm² closed to bottom contact fishing gear.

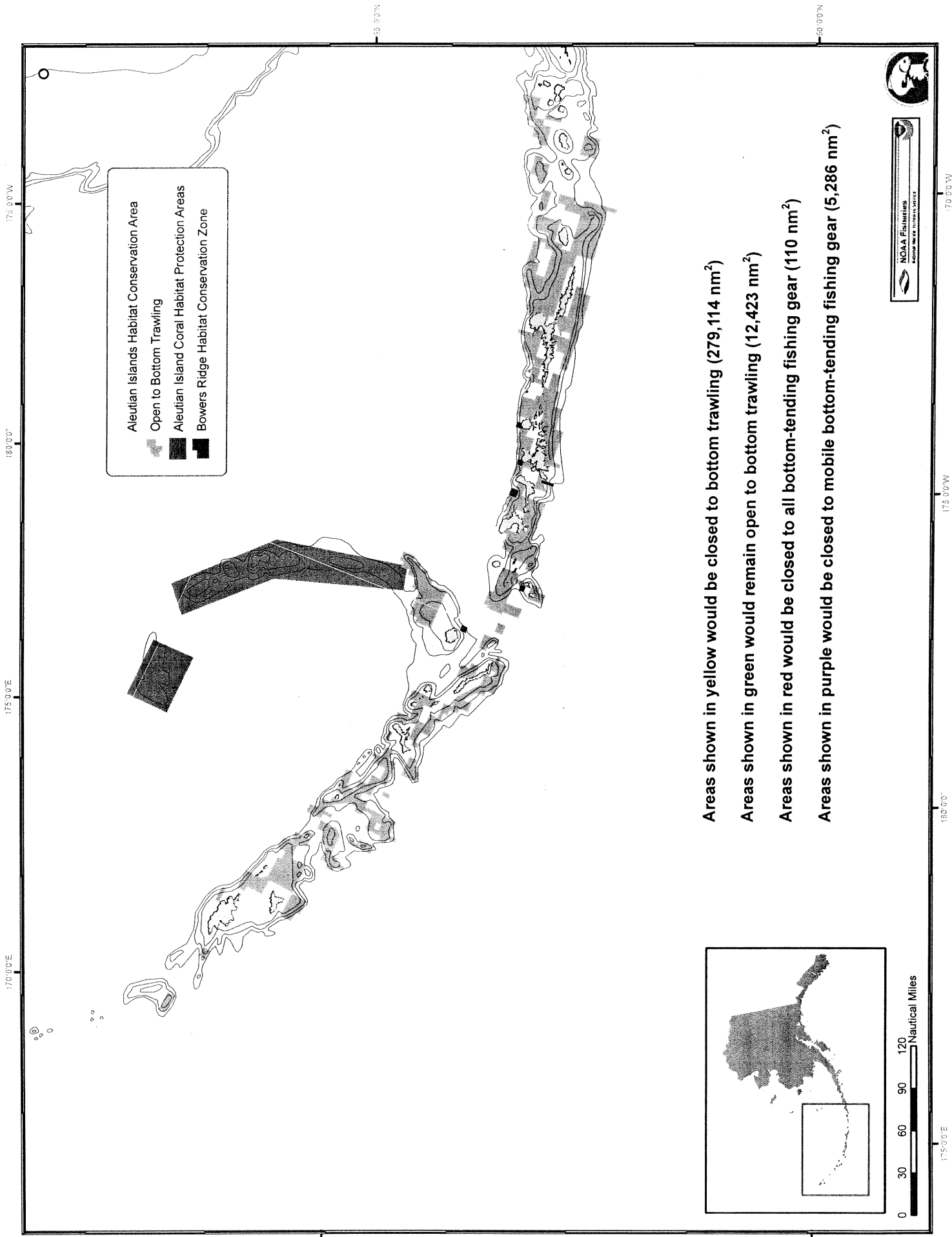
Effects on Listed Species

ESA listed species in the action area include the threatened eastern populations of Steller sea lions, the endangered western population of Steller sea lions, and endangered whales (humpback, right, sperm, blue, fin, and sei whales). The proposed management measures have the potential to affect these listed species by restricting the spatial distribution of existing and future commercial fisheries, thereby reducing potential interactions between fishing and listed species in the new closure areas and, due to redistribution of fishing effort, increasing the potential for interactions in the remaining open areas. We expect the redistribution of fishing effort to be very small because only a small amount of fishing takes place in the proposed closed areas.

In the AI, redistribution of fishing effort could result in increased interactions with Steller sea lions and whales. The principal concern for these marine mammals is displacement of Pacific cod and Atka mackerel fishing activity out of the proposed closed areas, presumably concentrating this activity in the remaining open areas where there may be increased potential for conflicts between fishing activities and listed species.

The western stock of Steller sea lions has declined considerably and is listed as endangered. The areas that would remain open to fishing in the AI under the preferred alternatives are fairly small, especially considering other existing closed areas. Fisheries for Pacific cod and Atka mackerel would be concentrated spatially into remaining open areas, including areas near important sea lion habitats. The preferred alternatives do not include reductions in the Total Allowable Catch, so fishing would not be further concentrated temporally during open seasons.

Spatially concentrated fishing activity during winter months when sea lions forage further from shore (outside existing sea lion closed areas) could increase the potential for conflicts from competition for prey, disturbance, or entanglement or other injury. In the past, rookeries in the western AI have experienced greater declines than others; any fishery encounters with these groups of sea lions would be of additional concern. A similar potential concern exists for ESA-listed whales that forage in the AI region or move through migratory corridors where more



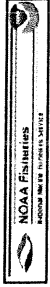
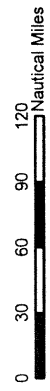
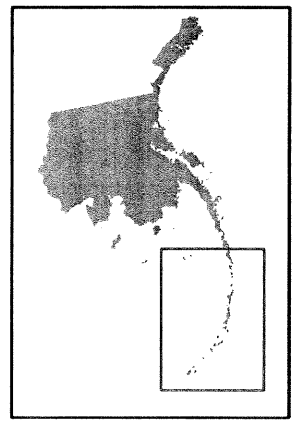
Aleutian Islands Habitat Conservation Area
 Open to Bottom Trawling
 Aleutian Island Coral Habitat Protection Areas
 Bowers Ridge Habitat Conservation Zone

Areas shown in yellow would be closed to bottom trawling (279,114 nm²)

Areas shown in green would remain open to bottom trawling (12,423 nm²)

Areas shown in red would be closed to all bottom-tending fishing gear (110 nm²)

Areas shown in purple would be closed to mobile bottom-tending fishing gear (5,286 nm²)



175°00'E

180°00'

175°00'W

170°00'W

170°00'E

175°00'E

180°00'

175°00'W

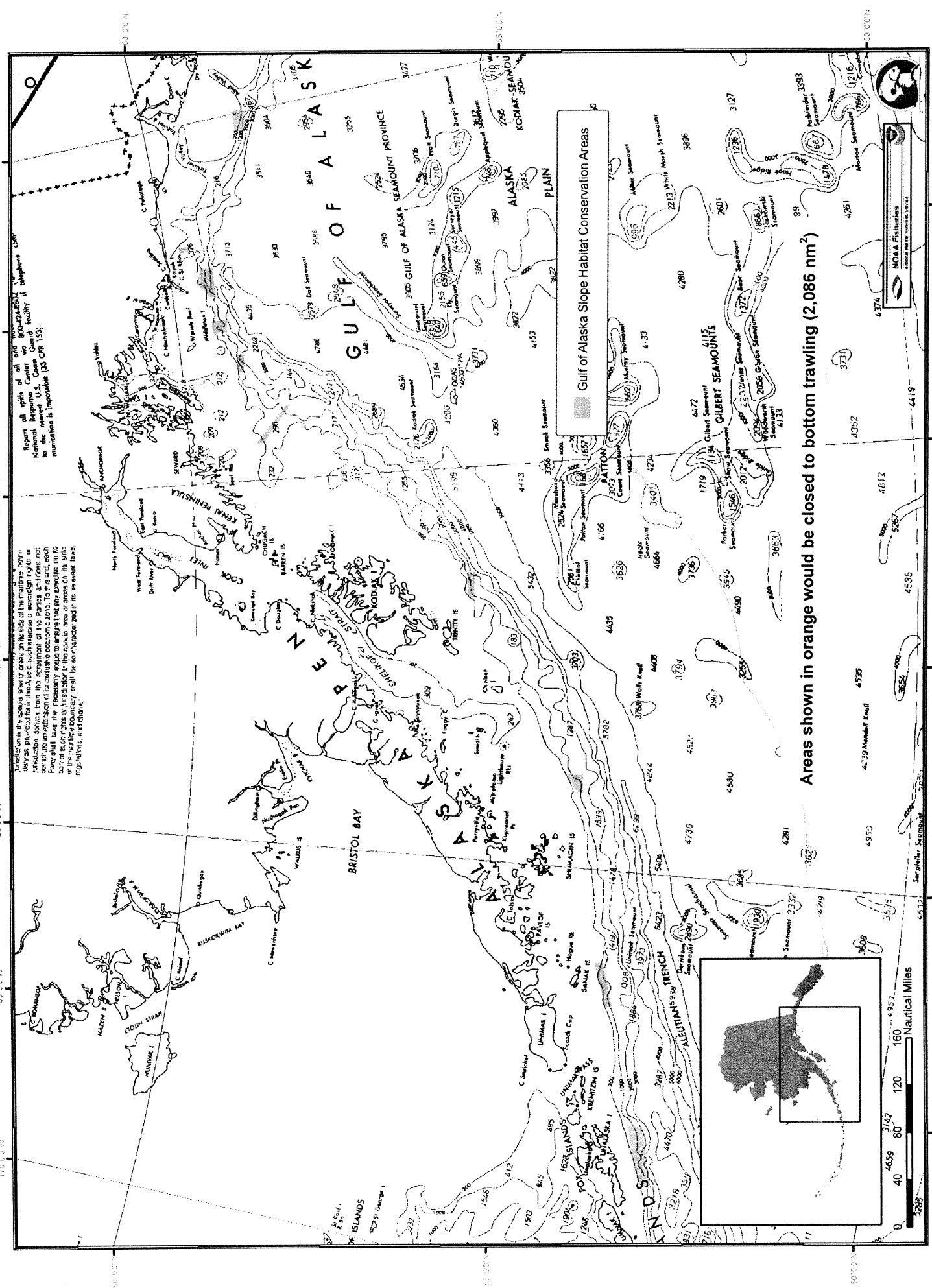
45°00'N

45°00'N

50°00'N

45°00'N

50°00'N

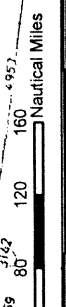
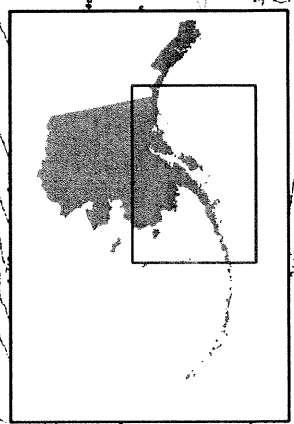


Indication in this chart of areas within the limits of the chart, or any part thereof, which are not surveyed, or which have not been surveyed since the date of the last edition of the chart, is not to be taken as an indication of accuracy or of the existence of any hazard. The user of this chart is advised to verify the accuracy of the information shown on this chart by reference to the appropriate charts and notices to mariners, and to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) website at www.noaa.gov.

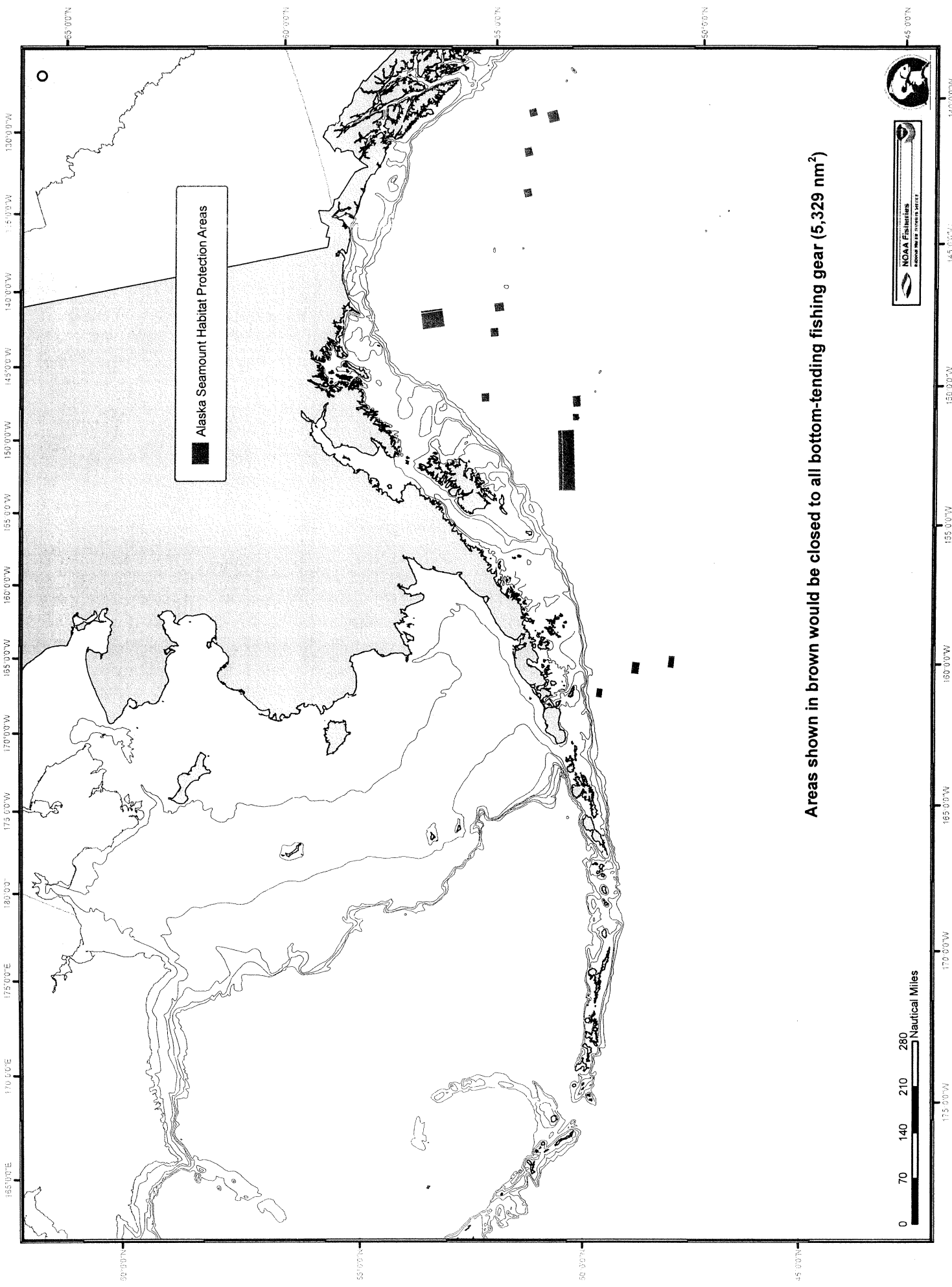
Report all shifts of all aids to navigation, including their location, to the nearest U.S. Coast Guard facility if telephone communication is impracticable (33 CFR 133).

Gulf of Alaska Slope Habitat Conservation Areas

Areas shown in orange would be closed to bottom trawling (2,086 nm²)



NOAA Fisheries
Division of Fisheries Service



Alaska Seamount Habitat Protection Areas

Areas shown in brown would be closed to all bottom-tending fishing gear (5,329 nm²)

0 70 140 210 280 Nautical Miles

