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NOAA's Fisheries Service Releases New Steller Sea Lion Recovery Plan

NOAA's Fisheries Service has published its new Steller Sea Lion Recovery Plan to help restore the endangered population in western Alaska and provide further improvements to the threatened population across eastern Alaska.

The recovery plan identifies an array of actions, but highlights maintaining current or equivalent fishery conservation measures; designing an adaptive management program to evaluate fishery conservation measures; and continuing population monitoring and research on the key threats to potential sea lion recovery. The full plan is available online at: <http://www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/stellers/recovery.htm>.

Also included in the plan is a comprehensive analysis of Steller sea lion status and ecology, a review of previous conservation actions, a threats assessment, biological and recovery criteria for downlisting and delisting, actions necessary for the recovery of the species, and estimates of time and cost to recovery.

"The new recovery plan will help increase the Steller sea lion populations to the point where they are again secure, self-sustaining members of their ecosystems," said Doug Mecum, acting administrator for the Alaska Region of NOAA's Fisheries Service. "Ultimately, the goal is to be able to remove Steller sea lions from the endangered species list."

The agency reviewed more than 8,000 public comments before putting this final plan together. In addition, the plan was reviewed by the Center for Independent Experts and by scientific experts commissioned by the North Pacific Research Board.

NOAA's Fisheries Service recognizes two distinct population segments of Steller sea lions, western and eastern, which divide at Cape Suckling, Alaska (144 degrees west longitude). Based on 2004-2005 data, experts estimate the western Steller sea lion population at about 45,000 in Alaska, with an additional 16,000 animals in Russia.

In western Alaska, where the population is listed as endangered, the potentially highest risk factors for Steller sea lion recovery are competition with fisheries, environmental variability and killer whales, according to research summarized in the new plan.

The western population declined through the 1990s, but showed an overall increase of approximately three percent a year between 2000 and 2004. This was the first recorded increase in the population since the 1970s. However, the most recent available data from incomplete non-pup surveys in 2006 and 2007 suggest that the overall trend for the western population segment - through 2007 - is either stable or slightly declining.

The increasing eastern population segment, in Southeast Alaska, British Columbia, and down the West Coast into California is listed under the Endangered Species Act as threatened, and its population is estimated to be between 46,000-58,000 individuals. The eastern population has been increasing at approximately three percent a year since the late 1970s.

In 2002, NOAA implemented regulations to change spatial and temporal patterns of the pollock, Pacific cod and Atka mackerel fisheries throughout the range of the western stock in Alaska to disperse fishing over time and area to protect against potential competition for important Steller sea lion prey species near rookeries and important haulouts.

In 1993, NOAA's Fisheries Service designated critical habitat, including a 20-nautical mile buffer around all major haulouts and rookeries, as well as associated terrestrial, air and aquatic zones, and three large offshore foraging areas for the western population.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, 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, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries – Alaska Region: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov>

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