

Alaska Marine Ecosystem Forum

MEETING SUMMARY

July 26, 2007, 1-5 pm
US Fish and Wildlife Service, Mary Smith Media Center, Anchorage, AK

The following member agencies attended the meeting. Underlined participants represented their agency.

North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC)

Stephanie Madsen, Chair
Chris Oliver, Executive Director
David Witherell, Deputy Director
Diana Evans, NEPA Specialist
Bill Wilson, Protected Resources Specialist

National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries)

Jon Kurland, Assistant Regional Administrator
for Habitat Conservation
Joe McCabe, Paralegal, NOAA General
Counsel

Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)

Leonard Corin, Fisheries and Ecological
Services Supervisor

National Park Service (NPS)

Judy Gottlieb, Associate Regional Director for
Subsistence and Partnerships

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Gary Reimer, Field Manager, Anchorage Field
Office

17th Coast Guard District (CG)

CDR Jim Robertson, Commander

Alaskan Command (ALCOM)

Jerome Montague, Tribal Affairs / Natural
Resources Advisor

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE)

Patricia Opheen, Chief, Engineering Division
Carl Borash, Chief, Project Formulation Section

Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)

Leslie Pearson, Program Manager, Prevention
and Emergency Response Program

Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

Samantha Carroll, Special Assistant

Department of Fish and Game (DFG)

Earl Krygier, Extended Jurisdiction
Coordinator

Also present at the meeting:

Brian Allee, Executive Director, Alaska Sea Grant
Molly McCammon, Executive Director, Alaska Ocean Observing System (AOOS)
Chris Krenz, North Pacific Project Manager, Oceana

Agency Briefings

Each agency present at the meeting gave a brief update on activities of interest with respect to the Aleutian Islands or other Alaska marine ecosystems. Some agencies provided handouts, which are attached to this summary.

Diana Evans, Stephanie Madsen – North Pacific Fishery Management Council (handout attached)

The Council has recently approved a Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the Aleutian Islands, which is discussed in more detail below. Changes to Steller sea lion protection measures, which constrain Federal groundfish fisheries, are being considered. New state water fisheries in the Aleutians, and minor adjustments to habitat conservation areas in the Aleutians, may have some effect on fishery patterns in the area. Outside of the Aleutian Islands area, the Council is also developing a Fishery Management Plan for the Arctic, with the intent to prohibit commercial fishing until sufficient information is available to assess environmental impacts. The Council has also prohibited bottom trawling north of Nunivak Is., in the Bering Sea.

Dr Jerome Montague – Alaskan Command (powerpoint attached)

Dr Montague briefly reviewed the military's structure in Alaska, both in terms of the command structure, and the location of installations. The airplane fleet at Elmendorf Airforce base will be changing soon, as C17s and F22s, which have more capability and require less maintenance, will replace C130s and F15s. 8,150 Alaska Army military are currently deployed supporting various missions. The military has also partnered with federal, state, and local agencies in Alaska to bring online the Alaska Land Mobile Radio. The project is an interoperable, shared, and secure radio communications system, which can be used in spill response, or public safety or other uses. 95 sites are currently operational, and others are planned (subject to funding by the State).

Of the sites that the military has identified as locations of marine interest, there are very few in the Aleutians, mostly consisting of old cleanup sites. Adak will be the homeport of the new X-Band radar as part of the missile defense Early Warning System. The radar is currently back in Hawaii, after one trip to Alaska, and is scheduled to be installed in Adak in February 2008. An anti-submarine war exercise is scheduled for 2008, of which some component may take place in Alaska. The military establishment at Galena has been deactivated, so will no longer be any threat as a pollution source for the marine environment.

Lenny Corin - US Fish and Wildlife Service

A rat eradication project is being planned for Rat Island, with partners The Nature Conservancy, and Island Conservation. The Service has previously had many years of success with fox eradication on other islands. The intent is to restore the natural ecosystem, as rats can be devastating to seabirds. A National Environmental Policy Act process is currently underway for this action, and hopefully work will begin in the fall of 2008.

Selandang Ayu update: the Alaska regional office has maintained the lead for the cleanup. In March 2007, the trustees issued a Notice of Intent to conduct restoration activities and restoration planning. The trustees are those with trust resources in that area, e.g. the Department of the Interior (USFWS), the Department of Commerce (NOAA Fisheries), and four State agencies (DFG, DNR, DEC, and the Department of Law). The goals of restoration are to return injured resources to the level that existed prior to the spill, and to compensate the public for losses resulting from the spill. No timeline has yet been established for restoration. An evaluation of the nature of harm to all resources affected by the spill is

required, and some preliminary ideas for appropriate compensation include: waste oil recovery at Dutch Harbor to restore sea ducks, mammals, fish, and human uses of resources; removal of invasive species (rats, foxes); debris removal on Unalaska or elsewhere to restore habitat; habitat protection in nesting areas for waterfowl injured by the spill; salmon; education/outreach on Unalaska related to the spill.

USFWS is also conducting a multimillion dollar project on walrus, out in the Bering Sea. Results of the project are not yet available.

Patricia Opheen – US Army Corps of Engineers (information attached)

The Corps is trying to be more innovative about sharing scientific information on its data collection projects, and looking for opportunities for collaboration with Federal, State and NGO partners, particularly with respect to civil works issues. Ms Opheen has been given the responsibility for promoting such collaborations, in addition to her responsibilities as Chief of the Engineering Division. She is encouraging project managers to facilitate information sharing, including scientific data, where possible, and identify mutual areas to economize. Such collaboration requires an innovative approach, as not everyone is used to data sharing in an open forum. The COE website now includes a list of the geographical location of all ongoing projects [*NOTE: The list is not operational yet; instead, Ms Opheen has provided documents describing ongoing projects.*] She also attends the Denali Commission [*July meeting notes attached*], and the Governor's subcommittee on climate change. Larry Hartig, of DEC, chairs that group. They have identified 17 initiatives, with sub-working groups for each. COE is supporting subgroups on people at risk, and communities at risk.

COE hopes that these initiatives will achieve way to share information effectively. COE is budgeting money to start putting information out on web, available to public. One of the difficulties with making data available is that one needs to be very careful about how it is used. Agencies are concerned that others will use the data without reading the foot notes, and moving forward with data sharing is going to require relationship trust-building. Another issue with data sharing, though, is compatibility. The North Slope Science Initiative has a website up and running, and COE is investigating whether it is appropriate to structure their data system similarly. Other agencies may be able to use the same basic format also (perhaps with expanded data fields).

Judy Gottlieb – National Park Service (handout attached)

NPS has an overall national strategy for ocean park areas; Alaska is developing a plan specifically for the region. Many of the Alaska national parks have coastal elements that involve inventory and monitoring; for some of the parks, there is an element of offshore monitoring and research (e.g., for marine mammals and birds in Kenai Fjords National Park).

The Alaska region is planning a joint meeting with the Pacific West region (which covers from Idaho to Guam), that will include a one-day session on climate change and oceans. NPS is also planning its centennial in 2016; if the budget comes through, there should be generous funds that will allow for initiatives such as education on climate change, or improving inventorying and monitoring programs.

Earl Krygier –Department of Fish and Game (information attached)

Mr Krygier is mostly involved in North Pacific Fishery Management Council issues. The Council's recent action to conserve Bering Sea habitat has frozen the footprint of fishing in the Bering Sea, protecting benthic shelf habitat, gray whales, Steller's eiders, walrus, and juvenile crab. Some fishing may occur in areas outside of the footprint, but will such expansion will be part of a research-driven process.

DFG also participates on the North Pacific Research Board, which recently funded the Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Program. In partnership with the National Science Foundation, the program provides 36 million dollars of funding over 5 years. This represents the first real attempt to try to integrate all parts of the ecosystem in the study, and a big focus is publicly-accessible data, and the integration of models [*pamphlet on the research program attached*].

Jon Kurland – National Marine Fisheries Service (handout attached)

The NPFMC, DFG, and NOAA Fisheries work very closely together, and many of the relevant issues are covered above. There have been recent adjustments to the Aleutian Islands Habitat Conservation Area; the Bering Sea habitat action described by Mr Krygier also serves to avoid fishing conflicts with communities, as fishing expands to new areas. The use of the research area allows cautious expansion of fishing. An Arctic fishery management plan is being developed, again as a precautionary action. A lot of work is being focused on updating the recovery plan for Steller sea lions. The cause of sea lion decline is still not fully known, although the 2 leading hypotheses are nutritional stress (potentially related to a regime shift, or carrying capacity issues) or killer whale predation. The NOAA Fisheries Alaska Fisheries Science Center is going to have a big role in the Bering Sea Integrated Ecosystem Research Program. Fieldwork is scheduled for 2008-2010, then data analysis and wrap up by 2012.

NOAA is also developing a plan for Integrated Ecosystem Assessments, which can be shared at a future meeting.

Leslie Pearson – Department of Environmental Conservation (handouts attached)

The handout provides a list of AI spill preparedness activities. It is very difficult to get data on vessels trafficking through the AI. Last July, the Coast Guard sponsored a Ports and Waterway Safety Assessment, to which marine pilots and industry came. The assessment provides general information on vessel risk and potential mitigation factors. The shipping assessment and safety assessments feed into the risk assessment. The DEC is also participating in the Arctic Research Commission's shipping assessment study, to the extent it can. In January, DEC participated in a 'potential places of refuge' workshop in the Aleutians. The study is actually taking place throughout Alaska. The workshop looked at the frequency of incidents in the Aleutians, and also prioritizes locations, based on sensitivity, depth, etc. Stakeholders, including marine pilots, participated.

In March, when there was almost another incident in Dutch Harbor, the Mayor of Unalaska proposed an ad hoc workgroup, to be proactive on addressing problems, as the AI risk assessment (see below) is taking time to get going. The project has momentum. The City has purchased an emergency towing system for smaller vessels (50,000 dead weight tons or less); DEC has purchased an emergency towing package for larger vessels (*Selendang Ayu* size). DEC will be doing a field training exercise next week, to develop a one page, easy to understand set of procedures, especially for people with little English, to help stabilize situations as they occur. Ms Pearson wants to try and do it without words, as otherwise it would be need to be translated into 16 languages. The hope is to have training aids and procedures in place by September, for the winter weather season. This is an example of a grassroot effort driven by the locals. As other places of refuge are identified, perhaps other towing systems can be put in place there too. Also, DEC is developing a contingency plan as well, that hopefully will get correlated with the risk assessment eventually.

The AI Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Program is part of a national program to look at coastal waters and ecosystems. The project uses a standard sampling methodology to identify health of ecosystem, and compare to other places within US. In the Aleutians, two summers of field research have

been dedicated to sampling data. This is baseline study for right now, and change will be monitored from now onwards.

Selendang Ayu update: DEC is continuing to work with the responsible party. The remaining part of the stern is still on beach. A company has been hired to remove the stern section, plus other debris on the shoreline (hatches, etc.). Then DEC will work on the State's civil case regarding the spill.

Gary Reimer – Bureau of Land Management

BLM has reorganized itself since the last AMEF meeting. Mr Reimer is head of the Anchorage district, which covers from Ketchikan to Shishmaref, including some coastal land. The agency is currently dealing with a Bristol Bay, and Ring of Fire land plans. The agency is divesting itself of any significant land holdings in the Aleutians. The Bristol Bay plan covers 1.6 million acres around Bristol Bay; it is in the same general area as Pebble Mine, and has some of the same mining issues. A new resource for the agency is an increased local presence in western Alaska. BLM has hired local people in Dillingham, Unakleet, and Bethel. These employees have about 50 years of connections in the various areas, and can conduct business locally, as well as translate (one of the local hires speaks Yupik).

CDR Jim Robertson – US Coast Guard

Aleutian Island Risk Assessment: The 2008 Coast Guard Authorization Act currently has full funding for the AI risk assessment, and also for a Cook Inlet Risk Assessment. Don Young has added funding to the Administration's authorization bill; if it gets signed, funding will be available. Cdr Roberson is the new Coast Guard liaison for the risk assessment.

Update on the Aleutian Islands Risk Assessment (Leslie Pearson)

DEC has been working with the Coast Guard on a Memorandum of Agreement. DEC will provide funds, through the Maritime Administration, to the National Academy of Sciences to begin the risk assessment for the AI. Contracts have been prepared, but not yet signed. The first step is for the National Academy to develop a scope and framework of the risk assessment, and this is anticipated to take 6-7 months. Coast Guard funding would then be used to implement the assessment itself. Hopefully the framework could be used for other regions, e.g., the Cook Inlet. Once the National Academy report is received, there will presumably need to be some time to adapt it specifically to an AI workplan. The proposed Coast Guard funding is for a 2 year data collection program in the AI, and 1 year in Cook Inlet.

Update on Alaska/Aleutian Islands Research Plan (Brian Allee) (powerpoint attached)

SeaGrant and the State of Alaska have received a grant to develop Alaska regional plans for research that is management oriented (applied research). The grant is \$400,000 over 5 years to create the plan, which will focus is on the Aleutian Islands (based on input from the Alaska Marine Ecosystem Forum), and Brian Allee (SeaGrant) and Dr Keith Criddle (UAF) are the primary investigators for the project. The objective is to look at who the stakeholders are, and what the top research issues are in the AI. Work to date consist of the establishment of a steering group, and the briefing of agency officials. The approach has been finalized, and SeaGrant is assembling and reviewing current research plans, and establishing a website. Heather Brandon, formerly of the State of Alaska, was going to be the major writer, but she has now left the State, so a graduate student is being sought, to work under Keith Criddle.

The approach is to focus on management-critical research needs, and assemble all current agency, NGO, university, etc. research plans, and pull them into a user-friendly internet-accessible database. Sea Grant would then identify opportunities for meaningful stakeholder input. The project website should be

interactive, perhaps with virtual town hall meetings, or a blog for investigators to communicate with the public, or an online forum. SeaGrant will also try to go out to the communities; for example, Reid Brewer is based in Unalaska, and does outreach, education, and monitoring.

The plan for the rest of 2007 is to brief Governor Palin and administration officials, and the new North Pacific Fishery Management Council leadership, on the grant project, and get input on research priorities. Within the next year, the project will establish a regional coordination group to plan and implement the research strategy, conduct the marine research assessment, and develop a communication mechanism for distributing these. The remaining three years of the projecting are just for updating existing deliverables, with some community facilitation input.

Update on oil and gas lease in the North Aleutian Basin

Kate Wedemeyer, of Minerals Management Service, could not make it to the meeting. The Bristol Bay lease did make it into the 5-year plan; other than that, there is no new information.

Polar shipping route (Trish Opheen) (handout attached)

The COE Commander's vision dovetails with the concerns of the State of Alaska regarding a polar shipping route. It takes the COE a long time to start new civil works projects to support shipping routes (it may take in excess of 17 years to get going), so it is necessary to start now with strategic planning. The northern sea route has been around for a while, but there is also need for harbors, places of refuge, staging for emergency equipment, and potentially for links to rail. COE can partner with communities or the State or tribes for developing harbors. The State of Alaska and the COE need have a consolidated vision, so that the same message is being conveyed to people in Washington, DC.

A brief summary of Arctic marine access is in the handout, and the Arctic Council is working on an Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment [<http://arcticportal.org/pame/amsa>].

Alaska Ocean Observing System (Molly McCammon) (powerpoint attached)

Ms McCammon is the head of the Alaska branch of the national Integrated Ocean Observing System, which is also part of a global program. The definition of 'ocean' comes from the US Commission on Ocean Policy, i.e., deep ocean, coasts, and also estuaries. Currently, there are 11 regional associations. One challenge in Alaska is that we do not have a common understanding of the extent of Alaska's coastline; the DNR website uses 47,000 nm (which includes islands); others say 34,000 nm. There is a need for accurate coastal maps – one cannot always tell how erosion has changed. USFWS working on map for western Alaska, and DNR is also doing mapping work. Such maps also need to be coordinated with the NOAA charts.

AOOS is user driven, and encompasses a broad spectrum of interests – resources users, researchers, etc. The approach is what are the stakeholder concerns (impacts), what information is needed to understand those impacts, how get there from observations or data. State of Alaska agencies have now signed on to AOOS' memorandum of agreement. The main issues are: safe marine operations, fisheries and changing marine ecosystems, natural hazard mitigation (Alaska has big storms), and climate change impacts.

AOOS is defining a vision of their optimal observing system, and then determining a strategy to fill in the gaps between what exists and what is ideal. Through a science and technical panel, and a socioeconomic panel, we can look at two ways to prioritize needs, and hopefully it will provide information to be able to figure out a direction for the next 5 years. AOOS is looking at various assets within the Federal agencies, and at how to create partnerships to meet multiple goals.

Data management and integration of existing available data is underway. AOOS now has a full time person funded at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center to integrate fisheries data with physical observations, and a SeaGrant person in Prince William Sound is working with the website to try to make data more user friendly, and to customize web pages for different user communities. AOOS is partnering with NPRB to use the Alaska Marine Information System program as a format for data. Also, AOOS is partnering with other Pacific observing organizations to provide larger North Pacific-scale data and models.

One challenge that Ms McCammon proposes is the need for Alaska to think about the relationship between the environmental groups in the state (AOOS, AMEF, North Slope Science Initiative, Marine Environmental Forum). A lot of effort is ongoing in the State, to move forward with collaboration and coordination. Perhaps now we are the point that we need to think about how do we coordinate among these collaborating groups? Are all the essential parties at the table? Should users and stakeholders be involved? How does the AMEF interact with other agencies?

AOOS is mostly funded from NOAA, so far, with some private grants. It has operated under NOAA grant, and now has earmarked funds through Senator Stevens that are passed through NOAA. Other regions have different funding bases.

NPFMC Aleutian Islands Fishery Ecosystem Plan (powerpoint attached)

The Council has approved a Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the Aleutian Islands. The boundary of plan corresponds with an ecological boundary at Samalga Pass, and encompasses US waters to the west. The FEP is a planning and guidance document for the Council, to provide an educational context for decisions affecting the Aleutian Islands. It contains a description of AI ecosystem processes, identifies key interactions that should be monitored, includes a non-quantitative risk assessment to focus on priority concerns, and provides implications guiding that Council on how to reduce the risk associated with these interactions. An overarching consideration for the Council highlighted in the plan is the importance of recognizing the AI as a distinct ecosystem in terms of fishery management, with a physical, food web, and socioeconomic considerations that are very different from the neighboring eastern Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska.

The Fishery Ecosystem Plan may be relevant to other Federal agencies as it pulls together a lot of information about the AI which may be helpful, for example, in cumulative effects analyses. The Council will distribute the document to other agencies when it is finalized in the fall, and requests feedback.

Election of Officers

Jon Kurland (National Marine Fisheries Service) was elected Chair, replacing Stephanie Madsen (who will no longer be on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council as of mid-August 2007). Larry Hartig (Department of Environmental Conservation) was elected Vice-Chair (in absentia), replacing the vacant Vice-Chair seat left by the departure of Kurt Fredriksson from DEC. Mr Kurland noted that it was anticipated in 2006, according to the Forum's Memorandum of Understanding, that the State officer who held the Vice-Chairmanship would become the next Chair. But given the changeover in the State administration, and the Vice-Chair vacancy, Mr Kurland agreed to act as Chair for the upcoming year, to allow for continuity.

Discussion of AMEF future direction, next meeting

The timeframe for the next meeting was identified as November 2007. Agenda items for the next meeting include updates on the AI risk assessment, the polar shipping route, the MMS oil and gas project, and the SeaGrant research project. New topics include a discussion of NOAA's plans for integrated ecosystem assessments.

The group noted that at some point in the future it may be appropriate for Federal and State agencies to consider the many regional collaborations that are being formed in Alaska, in terms of their purpose and potential for overlap, and to consider how the Alaska Marine Ecosystem Forum fits in among these groupings.

The Forum discussed whether to designate a new ecosystem area as a focus for the group. According to the Memorandum of Understanding, this would entail writing a new addendum to the MOU to identify issues for a new area. It was decided not to write the addendum at this time. Instead, it should be make clear for the next meeting that it is appropriate for any agency to make updates and presentations about any area in the state, given that the overall geographic scope of the Forum is clearly Alaska marine ecosystems. Such presentations may lead the Forum to identify another area for which to write an addendum.

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