



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
1315 East-West Highway  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
THE DIRECTOR

DEC 18 2018

RECEIVED  
DEC 27 2018

Mr. Simon Kinneen  
Chair, North Pacific Fishery Management Council  
605 W. 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, Suite 306  
Anchorage, AK 99501

Dear Mr. <sup>Simon</sup> Kinneen:

Thank you for your letter concerning federal groundfish surveys in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea. I am aware of the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) report to the Council and its Scientific and Statistical Committee, and of the Council's interest for NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service to fully fund the annual groundfish and crab trawl surveys in the North Pacific.

As you noted, the NOAA Ship *Oscar Dyson* is in drydock for major repairs and will not be available for pre-spawning winter pollock surveys scheduled for February and March 2019. The NOAA Ship *Bell M. Shimada* is the best alternative vessel available for the winter pollock surveys in lieu of the *Oscar Dyson*. Since Alaska groundfish surveys are some of NOAA's highest priority surveys, NOAA is presently rescheduling repairs and other surveys on the *Bell M. Shimada* to make her available for the pre-spawning winter pollock surveys. Assuming unanticipated problems do not arise in the course of those repairs, the ship should be available in Kodiak in early February 2019.

*Bell M. Shimada* is a sister ship to *Oscar Dyson* and thus can perform the surveys with identical gear and protocols. However, the ship's computer networks are not the same as the *Oscar Dyson's* so there will be some challenges in data processing. AFSC staff are prepared to meet those challenges to ensure the survey data are processed in a timely manner. NOAA fully anticipates *Oscar Dyson* to be ready and back in Alaska well before the summer Gulf of Alaska pollock survey starts in June 2019.

Maintaining sufficient charter vessels (and the staffing necessary) for annual Alaska Fisheries Science Center bottom trawl surveys is among our highest priorities. However, after an initial review of available resources for 2019, we expect to be able to fund only four vessels this year, three of which we supported with FY 2018 funds. At present, we plan to conduct a two-vessel survey in the Gulf of Alaska and a two-vessel survey in the eastern Bering Sea, including the northern Bering Sea extension, which is an additional Council survey request.

Each year, the Center evaluates and prioritizes planned projects and activities, allocating funds to its highest priority activities, which include stock assessments and the surveys needed to support them. During this period of unprecedented environmental change, the need for all types of data to support the assessments has grown, including the need for increased areal and temporal

THE ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR  
FOR FISHERIES



coverage by the surveys. The Center will endeavor to bring the best available science to the Council for management of Alaska marine living resources.

Resource limitations and unanticipated ship repairs are ever-present operational challenges. To the extent possible, we are trying to anticipate, plan for, and mitigate potential survey impacts from resource constraints. As you may be aware, the AFSC recently engaged with a subgroup of the North Pacific Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee in an effort to prioritize survey requirements. In addition, AFSC has undertaken several analyses to understand the relative value of different surveys to stock assessment, and in January 2019 the AFSC will lead an International Council for Exploration of the Sea workshop on Unavoidable Survey Effort Reduction. The intent of this work is to increase efficiency and optimize the impact of survey data, particularly if a reduction in survey effort is unavoidable. While maintaining survey and stock assessment capability is one of my highest priorities, undertaking these analyses is a necessary part of prudent planning in the current fiscal environment.

I appreciate your interest in this matter, and please know that I understand the critical nature of these surveys to ensure full, sustainable access to North Pacific fisheries resources. Dr. Robert Foy, AFSC Director, will be available to brief the Council at its February 2019 meeting on the status of agency resources to support these important surveys and on engaging in cooperative research with the AFSC.

Sincerely,



Chris Oliver  
Assistant Administrator  
for Fisheries