



North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Simon Kinneen, Chair | David Witherell, Executive Director
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Mr. Chris Oliver
Assistant Administrator
NOAA Fisheries
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910
VIA email: chris.w.oliver@noaa.gov

Dear Mr. Oliver:

At the April 2019 Council meeting, Dr. Robert Foy provided a report to the Council about the forthcoming budget to support on-going scientific activities at the Alaska Fisheries Science Center (AFSC) in 2019 and onward. The Council expressed significant concern regarding the ability to fund the basic process studies within the AFSC in addition to funding the surveys that are critical for stock assessments. The implications of reduced funding for basic science are of great concern to the Council, and will have deleterious downstream impacts to our management process.

With significant changes in ocean conditions in the North Pacific, we need more information not less. As was observed in the 2018 Bering Sea trawl survey, the absence of the cold pool in the Bering Sea appears to have caused major changes in the distribution of pollock and Pacific cod. Understanding and managing these kinds of major changes requires both basic survey work and ongoing process studies.

We would like to emphasize that process studies, as well as surveys, are a critical ongoing monitoring need and are among the highest priorities for research identified by the Council. In addition to the direct connection between assessment surveys and annual catch specifications, surveys yield other important data on species distribution, life history, and essential fish habitat, and other information that contributes to sustainable fishery management. While the annual stock assessment surveys are the essential foundation of our management, AFSC still needs to maintain a balance in funding to continue to support ongoing work into recruitment and biological processes and ecosystem-level research. The AFSC budget report indicates that they may lack sufficient funding for those studies.

As we indicated in our correspondence of October 2018, surveys are needed to support long-term time series. We also identified the need for an annual survey in the Northern Bering Sea, and tracking these changes will be critical to continued sustainable fisheries management in the North Pacific. Process studies are also needed to best understand, and plan for, the unprecedented environmental variability and climate change in Alaska. Rapidly changing distributions of fish populations in recent years increases the importance of the baseline survey effort as well as the necessity of process studies and data collection.

We encourage the agency to plan ahead for surveys and the collection of process data and support of basic process studies in the Northern Bering Sea area on an annual basis, so that the Bering Sea can continue to be sustainably managed for production of almost half the nation's domestic seafood supply.

Sincerely,

David Witherell
Executive Director