



North Pacific Fishery Management Council

Simon Kinneen, Chair | David Witherell, Executive Director
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May 13, 2020

Dr. Robert Foy
Alaska Fisheries Science Center
7600 Sand Point Way N.E. Building 4
Seattle, Washington 98115
Via Email: robert.foy@noaa.gov

Dear Dr. Foy:

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) is concerned with the delay in NOAA's Alaska fisheries surveys this year due to COVID-19, and is unaware of a plan to proceed. The Council requests an understanding of how NOAA intends to provide for surveys in 2020, as our fundamental data source to support groundfish stock assessments and ecosystem assessments in 2021. The seafood industry is currently addressing COVID-19 related impacts of State of Alaska travel restrictions and health mandates on harvesting and processing operations and implementing response plans to protect communities and the seafood industry workforce, as required by the State of Alaska. The industry is addressing the significant personnel, supply, and logistical challenges associated with vessel operations in the current environment. We recognize that survey operations have been affected by these same challenges and hope that similar planning and preparation is underway that allows North Pacific surveys to proceed in a safe and productive manner, knowing these challenges may extend beyond 2020

We recognize that NOAA received \$20 million in CARES Act funding specifically to help NOAA maintain continuity of operations and support the continued success of our nation's fisheries while keeping the workforce safe. It is our understanding that NOAA Fisheries is currently considering options to reduce the scale, cancel, or use alternative technologies for some surveys in 2020. We are uncertain how these changes to surveys would affect our 2020 data collection, stock assessments, and harvest specifications process and are requesting information on the factors NOAA Fisheries is evaluating to determine its plan for conducting surveys this year. We are specifically interested in the status of the Southeastern Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands and Northern Bering Sea trawl surveys, the Bering Sea acoustic survey for pollock, and the Gulf of Alaska and Aleutian Islands sablefish and groundfish longline survey. It would be helpful to understand the relative priority of conducting these surveys in 2020 and the extent to which the CARES Act funding will support these priorities.

The Council recognizes that NOAA Fisheries has a compressed timeline to conduct surveys in 2020 and we encourage the agency to move as expeditiously as possible to establish a plan for this year's survey operations. These are critical decisions for our Nation's largest fisheries, and they should not be made in absence of an understanding of downstream impacts. We encourage any opportunity to engage the Council on the specifics of a plan as soon as possible. While the Council is scheduled to receive an update at its June 8 – 10, 2020 meeting, having a plan provided in writing in advance of the June meeting will help make that discussion more productive.

The Council has consistently requested the necessary allocation of vessels and ship time to properly assess the Nation's largest groundfish fisheries, and have encouraged contracting options, where possible, with industry vessels to supplement NOAA surveys. The Council and our Scientific and Statistical Committee have emphasized that surveys are a critical ongoing monitoring need for the Council, and are the highest priority for research identified by the Council annually. We understand the need to proceed

carefully and implement protocols to protect the workforce, industry, and communities in a COVID-19 environment; we also note that the seafood industry is able to address those changes in operations. The Council is appreciative of agency efforts to date to maintain 2020 survey operations and data collection, remains hopeful that the agency will be able to make use of the additional resources provided to it as well as industries efforts to adapt to these unprecedented circumstances, and looks forward to further communication on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Simon Kinneen".

Simon Kinneen
Chair, NPFMC

cc: Mr. Chris Oliver, NOAA Fisheries