

Alaska Marine Ecosystem Forum

MEETING SUMMARY

January 25, 2010, 1-4:30 pm
Conference room, North Pacific Research Board, Anchorage, AK

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

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Marcia Combes, Director, Alaska
Operations Office

National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries)

Jon Kurland, Acting Deputy Regional
Administrator
Amy Holman, Regional Coordinator,
NOAA Alaska Regional Collaboration
Team

North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC)

Chris Oliver, Executive Director
Diana Evans, Fishery Analyst

Minerals Management Service (MMS)

Cathy Coon, Marine Biologist,
Environmental Studies Section

National Park Service (NPS)

Debora Cooper, Associate Regional
Director for Resources

Bureau of Land Management (BLM)

Gary Reimer, Field Manager, Anchorage
Field Office

17th Coast Guard District (CG)

Shane Montoya, USCG D17 Plans and
Force Readiness

Alaskan Command

Jerome Montague, Tribal Affairs / Natural
Resources Advisor

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE)

Michael Salyer, Chief, Environmental
Resources Section

Department of Fish and Game (DFG)

Stefanie Moreland, Extended Jurisdiction
Program Manager

Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)

Doug Dasher, Director, Alaska Monitoring
and Assessment Program

Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

Randy Bates, Director, Division of Coastal
and Ocean Management

Other participants:

North Pacific Research Board (NPRB)
U.S. Arctic Research Commission

Francis Wiese, Science Director
Cheryl Rosa, Deputy Director

Introductions

Marcia Combes, as Chair of the AMEF, opened the meeting and attendees introduced themselves.

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.

Jon Kurland, NMFS (handout attached)

Mr Kurland provided an update on major issues. NOAA received stimulus funding for habitat restoration through the Recovery Act, and four proposals were funded in Alaska. NMFS has implemented the new Arctic Fishery Management Plan, which prohibits all commercial fishing in Arctic waters until sufficient information is available to support fishing. NOAA is also developing a strategic plan for the agency's role and priorities for the Arctic, with an internal draft scheduled for the end of April.

Regarding protected species listing, NMFS has determined that ESA listing is not warranted for the two populations of spotted seals in Alaska, although a southern population off China and Russia should be listed as threatened, due to a decline in sea ice. Status reviews for ringed and bearded seals are underway, and listing determinations will be prepared by fall 2010. NMFS has also published a Critical Habitat designation for Cook Inlet beluga whales, for which the public comment period ends in March. A final designation will occur in the fall.

Michael Salyer, USCOE

Mr Salyer noted that within the Civil Works division, the Corps has three primary missions in Alaska: navigation, flood control, and environmental mitigation. As a water resources agency, a primary issue is water level increase. Much of their work occurs in the AI, mostly small ports and navigation improvements, but there are some ongoing cultural projects (for examples, graveyards being relocated). Engineers are working on how to measure climate change. There is not a lot going on for the Corps in the Arctic, but there are some studies for navigation improvement in western Alaska, and some flood control work in the interior. A few ecosystem restoration studies are presently ongoing, but there is room for growth in this area. In response to a question, Mr Salyer noted that the Corps gets involved in projects when there is either sponsor interest or congressional direction.

Francis Wiese, NPRB

The NPRB funds marine research throughout Alaska. The Board is comprised of stakeholders (the NPFMC, ADFG, USCG, NGOs, and also industry). NPRB has funded 230 or so projects in its history, through its annual funding cycle, and at any time has about 100 projects ongoing. Recently, NPRB has focused on Integrated Ecosystem Research Plan (IERP). The first was started for the Bering Sea in 2007 (in collaboration with the National Science Foundation), for a duration of 6 years, in order to address big climate and full system issues. The project includes climate scenarios, fishery management implications, subsistence/lifestyle implications, and everything in between. The NPRB is just starting to figure out an implementation plan for the GOA IERP, which will be smaller in scope (about \$10 million in funding), and 5 years in duration. The GOA IERP will kick off later this year. Mr Wiese's intention is then to focus more on the Arctic. In general, about 60% of NPRB funds go to Bering Sea projects, 30% to the GOA, and 10% to the Arctic (mainly because not as many proposals are submitted for the Arctic). At the last Alaska Marine Science Symposium, the NPRB hosted a workshop with Molly McCammon (AOOS) and the various research entities in the Arctic, to figure out what is happening/ ought to happen with respect to

Arctic research. The NPRB is poised to play two roles with respect to Arctic research: coordination, and also provision of some funding towards Arctic projects (although the scope of funding is still likely to be less than that devoted to the Bering Sea and GOA).

Cheryl Rosa, U.S. Arctic Research Commission

The U.S. Arctic Research Commission directs funding on the Arctic. It has no funding of its own, but it passes along recommendations to Congress and the President about what work to fund. The Commission works with stakeholders and rural communities to figure out what is worthwhile to research. The Commission will be publishing a 5-year goal plan in the near future (early February 2010; it will be available online at <http://www.arctic.gov/>). Several issues within the publication are related to the offshore marine environment: climate change/environmental change; oil spills/response; climate change and ocean acidification; the Arctic Marine Shipping Assessment report and its recommendations; Arctic human health (pollutants on food sources); co-management (e.g., of marine mammals); and access issues (trying to improve access for scientific work in places like Russia; trying to pave better relationships with Russian Far East). Identified research topics include: arctic fisheries, autonomous unmanned system, sea ice modeling, and others. All of the goals were developed through feedback from people like those in this group (researchers and stakeholders). Ms Rosa expects the goals report to be valuable resource.

Shane Montoya, USCG

LCDR Montoya noted that the USCG is coming up to their third summer of expanding operations in the Arctic. The overall goal is to figure out what works in the Arctic, in order to be better prepared when the time comes that the USCG will need to have a higher profile in the Arctic. Among other things, the USCG will be looking to see whether an icebreaker can be used for oil spill response in the Arctic. A joint exercise with Canada has recently started for the Arctic, looking at pollution response (similar work has been done around Dixon Entrance in the past). The USCG has been involved in response to some oil spills recently; it is clear that response works much better when everyone in the response team is on the same page, knows each other, and is acting in accordance to a similar plan.

Also, several topics at the Alaska Forum on the Environment will address climate change, pollution response, and strategies for adapting to climate change for rural communities in the US or Canada. LCDR Montoya can be contacted for further information on these sessions.

Can provide more information if anyone is interested.

Chris Oliver, NPFMC (handout attached)

Mr Oliver identified issues that are both high on the Council radar screen but also of interest to the AMEF. Several ambitious initiatives that are coming out of Ocean Policy Task Force, which the Council is tracking, but these will be addressed later in meeting. The Council is doing a review of essential fish habitat (EFH) specifications for managed fish species, for which a five-year review is required in regulation. Mr Oliver does not anticipate that there will be any major changes, but there will likely be minor adjustments to the description and distribution of EFH for managed species. The Council is also involved in the development of a research plan for the Northern Bering Sea Research Area, which is currently closed to bottom trawling, although at some point limited trawling may be allowed in the future. The Council is hosting a workshop in late February to gather information on subsistence use in the area.

One of the biggest items on the Council agenda is Steller sea lions (SSL). In 2001, the Council implemented a sweeping array of time and area closures to deal with fishery interactions with the endangered western population of SSLs. The population does not appear to be recovering in some areas, so NMFS is preparing another Biological Opinion on the Alaska fisheries, with a draft due out in March. Preliminary indication is that some of the fisheries may incur another jeopardy or adverse modification

finding, so further adjustments may be needed to management measures. The Council is also working on a chum salmon bycatch package. Although the pollock fishery itself is a very clean fishery (98% pollock), one of the bycatch species is salmon. Chinook bycatch caps were adopted last year, and the Council is now working on chum (although this is a lesser profile species).

Deb Cooper, National Park Service

The NPS has a Pacific Ocean Parks Strategy which addresses coastline parks for the Alaska and western regions. In Alaska, these include (but are not limited to) Glacier Bay, Kenai Fjords, Klondike, Sitka, Katmai, Lake Clark, Wrangell St Elias, Cape Krusenstern, and Bering Land Bridge. Representatives from all the regional parks got together at a workshop last October, to develop an implementation plan to tier off the regional strategy. They looked at implementing priorities with partners and adjoining management agencies.

The NPS is preparing to hire an Alaska Oceans and Coastal coordinator, and the region is working on a position description and list of primary duties. The position should be out in four or five months. It will be helpful to have the staffing resources for the NPS to be a more active participant in Alaska conservation and marine resources issues. There are staff involved in these issues in southeast Alaska, but virtually no one in the Arctic parks. At a recent Department of Interior retreat, which was attended by Jeff Mow, superintendent of the Kenai Fjords national park, the issue of ocean planning came up repeatedly, and there was a lot of discussion about the need to make the link between ocean issues and climate change (in response to the President's message).

Gary Reimer, BLM

Mr Reimer noted that BLM is generally an upland agency, but deals with some marine issues down by Sitka, and is involved with some subsistence issues there with herring. The Bering Glacier is a research interest for BLM, as they own extensive land holdings around the glacier. They have an older partnership for research, and were beginning to have a fairly good run of data on the glacier. The challenge is to keep funding that project (last year, they couldn't operate because of funding constraints). Mr Reimer also noted that BLM is starting a land use plan for a project on the north slope, and also that the agency has ten million acres on the upper Kuskokwim, and is interested in partnering with others on research.

Cathy Coon, MMS (handout attached)

Ms Coon noted that MMS has completed their Arctic multisale EIS, to support lease sales in 2010 in the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas. They are also doing an EIS for the Northern Aleutian Basin (NAB), for the expected sale date at the end of 2011. The NAB lease sale is highly controversial, and there has been some question as whether there may be a delay in the lease sale date.

MMS has supported a fair amount of research in the Arctic. During the recent Alaska Marine Science Symposium, Ms Coon hosted an evening workshop, primarily on Chukchi fish research. The discussion became broader, however, to talk about Arctic collaboration, and many agencies attended. Two ideas emerged: to organize a multi disciplinary, special publication in a well known journal as a plan for publishing Arctic research, e.g. in 2014, as a carrot for researchers. Second, while there are lots of plans for long-term projects, there is a need to focus on what is going to happen in the short term. The group decided to have a short list of plans, which would maybe allow for sharing of vessel time.

Jerome Montague, Alaskan Command

The EIS for navy training in the GOA for the next 10 years is being finished up. Public meetings were held last week, and will be this spring and summer too. A number of limited operating experiments are underway to evaluate projecting climate change 20 years hence, in terms of what might require a different make up of the military in Alaska. For example, would Alaska need a navy base, or are the airports sufficient. Also there is an administrative aspect, as currently the world is divided up into combatant commands that come together in the Arctic. If a war were to occur in the Arctic, it would involve all combatant commands, so is there a need for an Arctic combatant command.

Dr Montague also noted that the Alaskan Command is participating in a Native cultural training course from 3-5 March, and there are still some spots available if anyone from other agencies wants to attend.

Doug Dasher, DEC

As part of DEC's 10 year plan, they have adopted EPA's probabilistic sampling procedure to assess large regional water bodies, which involves surveys in individual estuaries to represent the total population. Surveys started with southcentral Alaska, looking at, among other things, water quality, benthic sediment conditions, fish trawl information, in order to understand biodiversity and contaminants. Surveys of the Aleutian Islands were in 2006-7, and the last of the taxonomic work has been completed on intertidal and nearshore areas. DEC has intertidal reports from Attu to Dutch Harbor, on sites that were sampled. Final quality control is underway, and the report should be out by end of the year. The methodology included both probabilistic sampling and also targeted sampling, for example in harbors and areas that may have pollutant problems.

There is also a national water quality monitoring assessment plan that EPA, USGS, and NOAA are working on. The plan includes a coastal element for Norton Sound, Kuskokwim Bay, Glacier Bay, and others. Site sampling has occurred in those areas, to compare with what's being done in the lower 48. The intent is to develop an overall national monitoring plan, for agencies and states to use for the future. The State of Alaska is not involved in that effort, but it has the potential to impact Alaska.

Stefanie Moreland, ADFG

Ms Moreland noted that the number one issue for ADFG is currently ocean acidification. The agency is working to coordinate with UAF and the AFSC acidification plan (which is currently unfunded), in order to understand issues of acidification on shellfish. From a fishery management point of view, ADFG is interested in being involved in research to understand impacts on shell formation. These issues are likely to affect the North Pacific first, because the undersaturated water is closer to the surface here than anywhere else. ADFG is still trying to decide where appropriate sites would be for putting monitoring instruments on buoys. ADFG is also working on trying to add another component to the research plan, to sample small crab, as an idea for small research projects.

Some work has come out of the State's Subcabinet on Climate Change, and it is an incentive for ADFG to develop a draft plan the agency to meet needs of climate change. This is being worked on internally. In the Arctic, the agency has been working since 2008 to conduct a salmon research study for north slope drainages, include a traditional and ecological knowledge component. Species presence and abundance is being tracked, and also juveniles. This project is thought to be a good project as an indicator for overall climate change. Also, the agency is working to better understand the distribution of salmon caught as bycatch in the pollock fishery. Hopefully there should be results soon.

Marcia Combes, EPA

Ms Combes also selected a subset of items that would be of interest to the AMEF. From a local perspective, EPA is finding itself most busy with permitting and the regulatory framework for which EPA is responsible in Alaska, and specifically the outer continental shelf work. EPA works with tribes as well as agencies. For 10 years the agency has been funding tribes to develop a local environmental capacity in their communities. Over that time, tribes have come to find EPA more accessible, so government to government work really comes more into play, especially with permitting on the outer continental shelf. In the Arctic, the issues are of high stakes, and there are challenges on all sides of the issue which must be addressed. EPA is involved in the Chukchi and Beaufort, but also in the North Aleutian Basin. The agency is being petitioned heavily to require zero discharge for all oil and gas exploration activities. That is not currently a regulatory standard for EPA, and has not applied in Alaska before now, but there is a lot of interest in doing so. EPA issues air and water permits, and the agency is getting ready to reissue permits for surface water discharge in the Arctic (it used to be a single permit for the Arctic, but is now being split into separate permits for the Chukchi and Beaufort). In Cook Inlet, the general permit issued a couple of years ago is in litigation. But EPA is also looking at all permits in place in the area, with an eye towards the beluga whale critical habitat designation. There are a number of regulatory permitting compliance issues with some of activities in Cook Inlet, the platforms and also the Tesoro refinery in Kenai.

Stepping back from local issues, EPA is working with the new administration to highlight what is unique about the Arctic, and work in Alaska in general. Ms Combes has been getting the attention of the new administration people and a number of folks on the Ocean Policy Task Force. EPA is waiting for funding picture to become more clear (likely next month), and as funding decisions are made, it is likely they will be doing more to support ocean policy. With respect to climate change, the EPA is doing more to regulate air pollutants (greenhouse gas emissions). But Ms Combes' staff are also trying to consider climate change in their everyday responsibilities. At the State level, the Subcabinet is getting ready to forward recommendations to the Governor. EPA has participated in that process, but is also interested to see what the State identifies in terms of priorities (e.g., communities most at risk from erosion, or how should we be focusing limited resources).

Arctic resource and management actions

Mr Wiese begun the discussion by noting that currently, research is not coordinated. There are a number of different groups of people doing research in the Arctic (e.g., academic institutions from the lower 48, NSF, MMS and industry stakeholders), and there does not appear to be a lot of interaction among them. For example, there is a State of the Arctic meeting occurring on March 16-19, which is taking place in Miami, FL. NPRB is trying to help coordinate these groups to represent a more coordinated approach.

NPRB has funded an Arctic Synthesis Project (Project 505, final report available online), which is a survey of published information available on the Arctic, but which does not include information available from industry, or grey literature from agencies. NPRB and AOOS organized a workshop, last year, which brought together many of the relevant research entities in Alaska, to further develop a common plan for the Arctic. Mr Wiese suggested that a plan to move forward could be to reconvene another workshop to define core issues, and bring these back to the AMEF to share that discussion. This could occur over the next 6-7 months,

The group agreed that the Arctic seems like a good topic for focusing the AMEF, to keep people informed about what is going on in these various arenas, given the AMEF's charter for coordination and information sharing. Ms Combes noted that available information on the Arctic is changing and evolving rapidly, especially as the administration is focusing on the Arctic. The group discussed the role of the

North Slope Science Initiative (NSSI) in research coordination, but noted that at least in the past, the focus of the NSSI has been terrestrial. Mr Kurland noted that the most recent NSSI plan does address some marine issues.

Alaska Monitoring and Assessment Program - Chukchi

Mr Dasher reported that funding is in place for a field program for surveys in the Chukchi for 2010-2012. This program is intended to link to the overall probabilistic survey of water quality and nearshore areas that has been started in other parts of the State. Mr Dasher provided a powerpoint handout, which is attached to these minutes and which summarizes some of the project design parameters.

DEC is looking for partnerships to complete this work, in terms of logistics, people, money, and vessel time. In the past, they have worked with NOAA and UAF. Within DEC, they are also trying to plan to integrate this survey with ongoing terrestrial work on the north slope and the northern coastal plain. DEC is still planning exactly where the survey should go, in order to prioritize the areas where there is the most need.

Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning

Mr Kurland described the purpose of the national Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning (CMSP) framework, which is meant to be place-based rather than activity-based, and is intended to integrate plans among various entities for activities in ocean coastal areas, identify synergies, conflicts, and provide a mechanism for resolving conflicts. The public comment period for the document ends on February 12. Ms Holman reported on a workshop that was held at the recent Alaska Marine Science Symposium, discussing this issue. Various speakers participated in panel discussions, and participants also provided comments. A similar workshop is planned to occur during the Alaska Forum for the Environment. Ms Holman intends to rite up the notes from the workshops, and submit them as public comments on the framework.

It was noted that there was opposition to the framework voiced by Native groups at the workshop, primarily related to a lack of clarity in the document about how the process will work, how stakeholders will be involved, and effects on subsistence uses. On the other hand, given the amorphous nature of the document, there was support for the general premise that some kind of marine spatial planning is a good way forward. The difficulty relates to who will have authority in this arena, and how to weigh subsistence needs over industrial needs. Another issue that was captured in the workshop was that the coastal and marine use is a dynamic situation, and cannot just be considered in horizontal space, but any planning must also take into account vertical space in the oceans, and the changing situation over time as resources move about. Also, many of the examples where marine spatial planning has been used elsewhere focus on conservation objectives, but one of the primary objectives for Alaska is also resource exploitation.

Mr Oliver reported that the NPFMC has submitted a joint comment letter with the other seven regional fishery management councils nationwide, which identifies a number of concerns with the framework, primarily that the framework is likely to create a large bureaucratic structure without clear authority. Specifically, concerns include: a lack of clarity about who would participate in the regional planning bodies overseeing CMSP; developing the plans will require resources from existing agencies, thus diverting staff from their current jobs; and that the task of analyzing and evaluating all information with regard to every activity in the oceans seems dauntingly ambitious and unrealistic. The State also indicated that they intend to submit comments on the framework, and that they are unlikely to be supportive. Several of the Federal agencies noted that they are waiting to see what comes out after the public review. Ms Combes noted that this should probably be an ongoing agenda item.

Nomination of Alaska sites to the national system of marine protected areas (MPAs)

Mr Oliver reported that the Council is considering whether to move forward with nominating any or all of its fishery closure areas to the national MPA list. The Council has a number of concerns about the process, many of which were aired at the last AMEF meeting in June 2009. A main concern is the definition of the 'avoid harm' provision. Mr Oliver noted that all agencies have an obligation to meet the 'avoid harm' provision for any agency's MPAs (there are currently four designated in Alaska). In December, the Council heard that NOAA is in the process of developing guidance on this provision. Is the 'avoid harm' provision restricted to the specific resources that are being protected under the MPA? At present, the Council has the authority to change fishery closure areas if conditions warrant, and there is a concern that that authority may be diminished if the closure is nominated to the national list. Mr Bates echoed this issue with respect to the State's concerns with the national MPA process as well.

Ms Cooper had earlier noted that the only current NPS MPA is Glacier Bay; although there was some discussion about nominating other Alaska national parks, those nominations have been withdrawn.

Status of AI risk assessment

This agenda item was postponed until the next AMEF meeting. A handout was distributed, however, identifying that the Phase A Draft Vessel Traffic and Spill Report is now available for review, at <http://aleutiansriskassessment.com/>.

Next steps

Ms Combes posed the question of whether the AMEF continues to be a useful forum. The group discussed the issue, and agreed that it is useful to have a forum for information exchange, and to hear what other agencies are working. It is also especially useful to have a forum to discuss big national issues that are being discussed, both to get different perspectives, and to ensure that these issues are on everyone's radar screen. Additionally, Ms Combes noted that it is helpful for the Federal agencies to hear the local Alaska perspective, and be able to pass that back along to those at headquarters.

Ms Combes noted that the Arctic has been identified at this meeting as a topic for focus in the future. The group suggested that although it is useful to be identify a focus, to make sure that the right agency people attend the meeting, it is also helpful to be flexible, and responsive to the issues of the day. The question was raised as to whether information sharing for the agencies has more of a science or policy focus, and that clarity about this aspect may be helpful in setting the agenda.

The group discussed, particularly with relation to discussions on the Arctic, whether to consider expanding the group to involve local stakeholders. At the same time, it was noted that at the AMEF's inception, there was a long discussion about this issue, and it was decided to limit the group to those with Federal and State jurisdiction, because the question of which groups to include becomes difficult when there are so many local interests. The AMEF has a non-advocative, disinterested role of information sharing, and to involve interested parties may change the tone and role of the group.

Summer 2010 (between June and August) was identified as the timeframe for the next meeting. Possible agenda topics include further discussion of coordinated work in the Arctic, an update on marine spatial planning, and the status of the AI risk assessment. Specifically for the Arctic, a suggested agenda item was an inventory of all the different groups or symposia addressing Arctic issues, and how the AMEF agencies fit into these different fora, to identify who is involved where, and where the data gaps might be.