

Docket number: NOAA-NMFS-2017-0137
Submitted through www.regulations.gov
February 1, 2018

Aleutians East Borough Comment on NMFS Proposed 5-Year Review for the Endangered Western
Distinct Population Segment of Steller Sea Lion

The Aleutians East Borough has previously requested regulatory relief from onerous Steller sea lion regulations in southwest Alaskaⁱ. We hope one outcome of this 5-year review is the delisting of the western distinct population segment (wDPS) of Steller sea lion. Steller sea lion counts in the western Gulf of Alaska and in the eastern Aleutian Islands have been steadily increasing in recent years.

The Aleutians East Borough proposes that three Steller Sea lion rookery sites within the navigable waters of the Aleutians East Borough be added to the Navigational Transit exceptions in the Steller Sea lion regulations Title 50 Part 223, Subpart B, section 223.202(b)(6), to allow vessels continuous transit to maintain a minimum of 1 nautical mile from each rookery site, rather than 3nm. The Borough asserts that vessel transit restrictions near Steller sea lion rookeries and haulouts can be unnecessarily burdensome to local fishing vessels and can negatively impact vessel safety.

The Aleutians East Borough requests the following sites from Table 1 to 50 CFR part 223.202 be added to the list of navigational passageways : 6) Atkins Island, 7) Chernabura Island, and 12) Akun Island. These recommendations are for historically important passageways for the local 58-foot LOA fishing vessels.

We believe this action will increase vessel safety in the waters of the Aleutians East Borough. In times and areas of extreme weather conditions, local vessels should be allowed greater ability to safely navigate, while maintaining a safe distance from rookeries. Vessels maintaining a minimum of 1 nm near these rookeries, rather than the current 3 nm, will enjoy increased navigational safety.

We know that Steller sea lions are transitory, and from the behavior of these animals in and around local municipal harbors, they are not harmed or impacted by vessel noise or activity. The proposed change may have little or no impact on the western DPS of Steller sea lion or designated critical habitat, however fishing vessels will have the confidence to be able to travel safely in Borough waters without fear of prosecution from violating an overly restrictive 3nm approach buffer to Steller sea lion rookeries.

The Aleutians East Borough Natural Resources Department stands ready to work with NMFS on this issue and we look forward to providing further assistance.

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ⁱ https://www.npfmc.org/wp-content/PDFdocuments/CM/2017/101817/NMFSresponse_StellerSeaLion.pdf