

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

CHAIRMAN DOC HASTINGS

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Witnesses Decry NOAA's Unsubstantiated Stellar Sea Lion Science Jeopardizing Commercial Fishing Industry, Coastal Economies

Seattle, WA – Today, the House Natural Resources Committee held a Full Committee [field hearing](#) on “NOAA's Steller Sea Lion Science and Fishery Management Restrictions - Does the Science Support the Decisions?” Members in attendance, including Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04) and Rep. Don Young (AK-At large), heard from the Administration, state officials, scientists and the commercial fishing industry on the devastating economic impacts of NOAA's North Pacific groundfish fisheries restrictions and the faulty science upon which the restrictions are based.

“The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's own documents state that the imposition of the fishery management restrictions put in place last January will cost the commercial fishing industry between \$44 million and \$61 million per year and cause the loss of between 250 and 750 jobs. At a time when every effort should be focused upon creating jobs and economic opportunities, it certainly stands out when an action by a Federal agency will result in this degree of economic loss - especially when one of the missions of the agency is to fully utilize the Nation's fishery resources,” **said Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04).**

“Once again, the National Marine Fisheries Service cannot say with any certainty what is causing the Steller Sea Lion population decline, but fishermen are again paying the price. While we have no idea if these closures and restrictions will benefit the sea lion, we do know that they will have devastating effects on the fishermen and fishing communities. From all the evidence I've seen, I can reasonably draw only one conclusion—we're confronted with an Agency that has a premise, but a lack of information to prove or disprove it. ... As Alaska and Washington have aptly demonstrated, this NMFS doesn't have the best available science or even complete science, and, as a result, our fishermen and communities will suffer,” **said Rep. Don Young (AK-At large).**

In 1990, the Steller sea lion was added to the Endangered Species List and in 1997, the population was reclassified into two Distinct Population Segments – the western population was classified as endangered and eastern population was listed as threatened. Due to concerns that the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands groundfish fishery was jeopardizing Steller sea lion recovery, the fishery has been operating under Endangered Species Act restrictions imposed in 2000. In November 2010, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) issued a new Biological Opinion (BiOp) for the Bering Sea and the Gulf of Alaska groundfish fisheries that retained restrictions from the 2000 BiOp and added significant new closures for the Pacific cod fishery and the Atka mackerel fishery in the

western Aleutian Islands.

In response to concerns raised by the Council and due to the lack of consensus among the scientific community concerning the causes of the decline of the western Steller sea lion population, the States of Alaska and Washington commissioned four expert panelists to conduct an independent science review of NOAA's Steller Sea Lion BiOp. According to **Bill Tweit, Special Assistant for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**, *"Washington acknowledged that there are very significant scientific uncertainties concerning factors for decline for Stellers Sea Lions in the central and western Aleutians, and was hesitant to draw our own conclusions regarding the NMFS scientific and economic assessments until we had the benefit of an independent review."*

Dr. Andrew Trites, Professor and Director of Marine Mammal Research Unit, Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia, and Dr. Gunnar Knapp, Professor of Economics at the University of Alaska, were two of the four scientists appointed to the independent scientific review panel. The panel's final report found that, *"NMFS misinterpreted crucial evidence from statistical studies of relationships between fishing and sea lion demographics. NMFS also failed to scientifically support their explanation of how fisheries affected sea lions (fishery-driven nutritional stress), and disregarded or misreported evidence that refutes the fishery-driven nutritional stress hypothesis. And finally, NMFS did not seriously consider alternative ecologically mediated explanations for declines in sea lion numbers not involving fisheries (environmentally-driven nutritional stress and the killer whale predation hypotheses)."*

Commercial fishing supports thousands of jobs and is a significant source of revenue in Alaska and Washington. **Doug Vincent-Land of the Alaska Department of Fish and Wildlife** emphasized the importance of a robust fishing industry to Alaska's economy. *"As many as 900 people are employed by fisheries fleets and processors in the area facing restrictions. The Service acknowledges that implementation of its decision would cost fishery losses of up to \$66 million annually."* As such, the State of Alaska questions, *"whether these restrictions are justified in light of evidence that the stock now numbers over 73,000 animals, that it is growing overall across its range, and that there is a lack of credible data showing that fishing is in fact jeopardizing Steller sea lions or adversely modifying their habitat."*

The President of Aleut Enterprise, Ryuichi Rudy Tsukada, spoke on behalf of the Native Aleuts living on Adak Island, an island on the western edge of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska: *"National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) groundfish restrictions have severely undermined the economic development of Adak Island and the welfare of the Aleut people."* According to Tsukada, *"NMFS' restrictions will greatly shrink Adak's economy, which relies heavily on a vibrant fishing industry. Fishing vessels regularly visit Adak to purchase fuel, provisions, food, lodging, and other goods and services. The fisheries closures severely threaten Adak businesses, many of which are subsidiaries of the Aleut Corporation. Numerous fish processing facilities, including Aleut Enterprise subsidiary Aleut Fisheries, LLC, are a critical part of the Adak economy, providing jobs to the Aleut Community in and near Adak."*

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