



Alaska Marine Policy Forum

Summary from Wednesday, Dec 15, 2021

Host: Ginny Eckert, Alaska Sea Grant

Notes by Darcy Dugan

The Alaska Marine Policy Forum is a bimonthly teleconference for Alaskans to network and share information about marine policy, budgets, and legislation at state, national, and international levels, sponsored by Alaska Sea Grant and the Alaska Ocean Observing System (AOOS). Contact dawn.montano@alaska.edu to receive email reminders and agendas for upcoming calls, and summary notes following each call. Visit the AOOS website for an audio recording of this call.

Alaska Congressional Delegation Update

Carina Nichols, Senator Sullivan's Office

- Senator Sullivan's office is spending a lot of time on the debt ceiling and the national defense appropriation.
- The Alaska congressional delegation hosted a salmon round table last week for people to share perspectives and science. Senator Sullivan is also meeting with fisheries constituents well NOAA administrator, Dr. Rick Spinrad, to help elevate Alaska issues and salmon.
- Sen. Sullivan is working on a salmon research bill they will introduce soon that will create a task force with academic experts, industry, subsistence, traditional use, and NOAA and North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC) members. The task force would develop a report about what is known on salmon research as well as recommendations and research priorities. Carina can share a draft of the bill with those interested.
- Questions: Carina_Nichols@sullivan.senate.gov.

Maya Becker, Senator Murkowski's Office

- Maya Becker is the Sea Grant Knauss Fellow for Senator Murkowski's office working until the end of January 2022. She can be reached at: maya_becker@murkowski.senate.gov.
- Senator Murkowski was also part of the salmon round table in December. There is a portal on her website to access the recording and provide feedback. <https://www.murkowski.senate.gov/salmon-roundtable-portal>
- Senator Murkowski has reintroduced the Blue Carbon for Our Planet Act in November with Senators Whitehouse and Collins. This would direct the creation of a national inventory of coastal blue carbon ecosystems and create a national strategy for their protection and restoration to promote carbon sequestration.
- Senator Murkowski will also be introducing a bill to formally establish and support ocean innovation clusters in the interest of the blue economy and coastal communities.
- Alaska Sea Grant State Fellowship applications are due Feb 11, 2022 – please share with soon-to-graduate or recently finished graduate students interested in the science and policy needed to keep our marine resources healthy. <https://alaskaseagrant.org/education/awards-fellowships/state-fellowship/>

Nicole Desrochers, Congressman Young's Office

- Congressman Young participated in the salmon summit described above

- There was a Magnusson-Stevens Act (MSA) hearing on Nov 16. Congressman Young's MSA reauthorization bill was discussed along with Senator Huffman's reauthorization bill. Representative Dingell also had a forage fish bill that was discussed that was a provision in Senator Huffman's bill but it was discussed as a standalone bill. Congressman Young and Senator Huffman are having conversation to work together and develop a bipartisan bill. Huffman's bill will be marked up in early 2022.

Legislative Updates

Representative Sarah Vance

- Bycatch has become a prominent issue in Alaska; it has historically been federal and handled by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (NPFMC), but many Alaskans have come forward asking the legislature to use their voice.
- Rep. Vance has pinned letters to the NPFMC about the need to implement abundance space management in order to have conservation efforts to sustain a strong harvest for the future.
- A letter on bycatch was signed by 28 legislators, bipartisan across both the house and senate.
- Rep. Vance requested the House Fisheries Committee to hold a hearing so there could be more discussion to find out what the impacts are. One was held in November.
- A decision came out of the NPFMC on Dec 13; it was a step in the right direction towards implementing abundance based management but not what they had hoped for.
- Another issue of concern in her district: commercial fishing closure of the EEZ in Cook Inlet. This was a decision by the NPFMC. The state said they didn't want to co-manage that fishery. Rep. Vance disagrees. UCIDA started a lawsuit and the City of Homer has been discussing a resolution to join an amicus brief.
- Rep. Vance has introduced HB52 which cures a legal land dispute issue in Kachemak Bay State Park and Tutka Bay Lagoon Hatchery.

Invited Speakers

Church Key, senior advisor for Arctic Strategic Affairs, Department of Defense

- Church is leading the development of the Ted Stevens Center for Arctic Security Studies, the Department of Defense's newest regional center (there are 5 established centers).
- The centers are focused on research and analysis, executive education, and engagement and outreach. The Senate just passed the National Defense Authorization Act for 2022 which establishes the new Arctic center.
- The new center will be based in Anchorage. It will reach initial operating capacity this July and will be fully operational in 2023. It will cover the broadest possible dimensions of security in the Arctic.
- The Arctic is driven by geophysical change and geostrategic change. They will look at specific research programs or to OSD policy priorities for cloud responses to transnational threats, fostering common perspectives on security challenges, and strengthening national and multinational institutional relationships.
- They hope to bring value to the table and allow the center to compliment the other activities going on in the region. Engaging with the science community will be an important component. [Fact sheet on the new center.](#)

Jill Seymour, NOAA Fisheries

- Jill is the Cook Inlet Beluga Whale Recovery coordinator and provided updates on recovery work that NOAA and partners have been doing.
- Cook Inlet belugas were listed as endangered in 2008 by NOAA Fisheries due to a precipitous decline (80% since the late 1970's). They estimate the current population is 279 individuals.
- Beluga range has also retracted. Currently belugas are concentrated in the upper inlet, particularly around Anchorage and the Susitna Delta which means they are overlapping more with the area of highest human activity.
- The original decline was determined to have likely been overharvest. There has been no harvest since the early 2000's, so the expectation was the population would rebound.
- Instead, the population has continued to decrease and the cause at this time is unknown.
- Potential causes include anthropogenic noise, reduction in prey, habitat loss and degradation, disease, pollution, or cumulative effects.
- NOAA and partners are conducting research to understand the causes of the decline. This includes ongoing biopsy sampling program, collecting tissue samples from dead stranded belugas. Epigenetics allows them to use the samples to estimate age. They can also compare ages with hormone information to determine whether it is of reproductively mature. So far they've analyzed 15 females; 10 were under 20 and five were over 20 years. Only one in the younger age group was pregnant, 3 of the 5 older whales were pregnant.
- They may be seeing a delayed age of first reproduction in the Cook Inlet population, though this is preliminary.
- They also have acoustics devices recording beluga calls in 14 locations in the inlet. This has allowed them to look at relationships between beluga presence and how that might be time with spawning runs for different species of anatomist fish.
- They are working to develop a population consequences of disturbance model that will allow them to assess the degree to which anthropogenic disturbance like noise may impact survival and reproduction.
- They are also conducting environmental DNA analysis of water samples collected in the inlet where we know belugas do occur to understand what prey species are present.
- There is an ongoing beluga photo ID project.
- Earlier this year, NOAA published a new five-year priority action plan for the species which highlights the top priorities in terms of research and recovery effort.
- There is a collaborative monitoring program where partners train members of the public to help monitor for belugas. The first spring monitoring session was this year and their second one is March 2022.

Announcements

Senator Peter Micciche

- Sen. Micciche has appointed two senate members to the new Alaska Marine Highway Board through Rep. Stutes' bill.
- He's appointing himself to the new bycatch task force. Please forward information his way. Senator.Peter.Micciche@akleg.gov
- There's a bill on the dual registration issue with the derelict vessel bill and unintended consequence; this needs to be fixed.
- Sen. Micciche is very concerned about EEZ closure in Cook Inlet. It will move the entire drift fleet into beluga habitat.

- More federal funding will be coming to new highways, docks, etc. through the infrastructure bill. They will be carefully considering responsible funding projects.
- There are also several bills on mariculture and Board of Fish conflicts of interest

Tav Ammu, Alaska Sea Grant fellow

Tav is working on the Clean Harbors Program and trying to get a better understanding of the state of the harbors around Alaska: what people think about pollution within the harbors, how best to address the issue and communicate proper management techniques. Please [check out the blog and fill out the survey](#).

Ginny Eckert, Alaska Sea Grant

Alaska Sea Grant fellowships are open and Sea Grant is also looking for hosts for the Alaska Sea Grant State Fellowship Program. <https://alaskaseagrant.org/education/awards-fellowships/>

Next Alaska Marine Policy Forum call: February 16, 2022, 1 pm Alaska time.