



## United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
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### Report # B-5: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council

The following information is a summary of major issues the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is involved in that are related to the affairs of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (Council). The information are either updates on significant, ongoing issues the Council has been briefed on previously or an initial briefing. The summaries are presented according to the Service's program that is coordinating efforts for the issue.

#### **I. Endangered Species Act Issues:**

##### *Short-tailed albatross and Steller's eider*

The Anchorage Fish & Wildlife Field Office submitted the Biological Opinion to the National Marine Fisheries Service on the management plans for the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands ground fish fisheries and the parallel fisheries in the State of Alaska. The document addressed Fish and Wildlife Service concerns related to the fisheries effects on short-tailed albatross and Steller's eider.

For further information, contact Erin Knoll, Endangered Species Biologist, Anchorage Fish and Wildlife Office, at [erin\\_knoll@fws.gov](mailto:erin_knoll@fws.gov), or (907) 271-3063.

#### **II. Migratory Bird Management Issues:**

##### *Seabird Mortality Events – Common Murres*

Since March 2015, unusual seabird mortality events have occurred throughout the northern Gulf of Alaska, ranging from King Cove to Sitka. More than 100 seabird carcasses have been examined and tested by the U.S. Geological Survey National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) and results indicate the cause of death in nearly all birds is due to starvation. Two puffins were positive for Saxotoxin, related with Paralytic Shellfish Poisoning (PSP). Strong storms during late December and early January resulted in thousands of dead murre being washed up on beaches across the Gulf of Alaska, ranging from Chignik Lagoon to Sitka, Alaska.

Data collected in Alaska since 2007 by the Coastal Ocean and Seabird Survey Team (COASST) indicate normal die-off rates valued to be 0.1 carcasses per kilometer. As of fall 2015, observed levels are several orders of magnitude higher than normal. While

there are historic accounts of murre die-offs, this year is unusual in total numbers observed dead, overall duration, and geographic extent. The summer of 2015 had reports of several unusual findings, including harmful algal blooms, coccolithophore blooms, unusual mortality event for whales, and colony abandonment by murre during the breeding season. The on-going seabird mortality event rivals the Exxon Valdez in mortality of murre and exceeds the spill's geographic extent.

It is assumed the die-off is connected to one of the largest oceanographic-atmospheric events, known as "The Blob." Water temperatures in this large area are well above the respective historic average temperatures observed in the North Pacific. It is unclear how this relates to El Nino or climate warming, but these are likely related factors. The direct mechanisms causing murre starvations are still not understood.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service continues to coordinate with state, federal, and non-government partners to collect carcasses for testing at the NWHC. Next steps include coordinated efforts with state and federal partners to survey and collect demographic data to estimate total mortality and model potential impacts to Alaska's murre population. Reports of dead or dying seabirds have declined since the New Year weekend storm, but additional mortalities are expected to occur with future winter storms. Please refer reports of dead or dying seabirds to the Migratory Bird Management Hotline (1-866-527-3358) or the MBM email address (AK\_MBM@FWS.GOV).

For further information, contact Kathy Kuletz, Wildlife Biologist Seabird Specialist, at [kathy\\_kuletz@fws.gov](mailto:kathy_kuletz@fws.gov), or (907) 786-3453.