

Trip Report: NPFMC Outreach to St. Paul Island, Alaska
June 23-28, 2017

Prepared by Council staff members:
Steve MacLean, Sarah Marrinan, Diana Stram, Sam Cunningham, and Jim Armstrong

Council members and staff from the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) attended a series of meetings in St. Paul Island, Alaska, at the request of the City of St. Paul and representatives of fishing industry groups on St. Paul. The Council's vice chairman, Bill Tweit (WA), and council staff (Steve MacLean, Diana Stram, Sam Cunningham, Sarah Marrinan, and Jim Armstrong) traveled from Anchorage, AK to St. Paul Island, AK on 23 June 2017.

The original purpose of the visit and meetings was to foster an exchange between people of St. Paul and Council members and staff. The visit was an opportunity to inform Council members and staff of the unique needs and challenges for a halibut fishery dependent community in the Bering Sea, and for the Council representatives to provide information about ongoing projects that may impact residents of St. Paul Island. As information about the continued decline of northern fur seals in the Pribilof Islands was presented to the Council, the trip also provided an opportunity to learn about the residents of St. Paul's continued reliance on northern fur seals and their concerns with the status of the species. The following is a summary of meetings that took place on St. Paul Island.

Meetings with the community members and community organizations took place on Sunday afternoon (6/25) Monday (6/26), and Tuesday (6/27). Summaries of the meetings follow.

Community Presentation by Council representatives

A community presentation was held in the City of St. Paul Recreation Hall and was attended by up to 90 people.

The meeting was brought into order by St. Paul Mayor, Simeon Swetzof. After introductions of Council members and staff, Dr. Diana Stram presented an overview of recent actions that the Council has taken to reduce bycatch of Pacific halibut in the Bering Sea, and provided an overview of the current action to consider ways to allow halibut bycatch limits to fluctuate with measures of halibut abundance. Questions from the audience were held until after the presentation.

Questions and discussion focused on several main themes: current methods and tools to reduce halibut bycatch in the BSAI trawl fisheries, movements of the BSAI trawl fisheries relative to halibut bycatch, regulatory and non-regulatory methods to control bycatch, and fishery and bycatch data.

Discussion started with questions about how bycatch limits are established, and whether that accounts for increases or decreases in halibut biomass. Dr. Stram explained that current bycatch limits are set at a fixed amount, but that the Council is considering ways to allow bycatch limits to fluctuate with abundance. There were several questions about what the trawl fisheries are currently doing to reduce halibut bycatch, and what happens when they encounter higher than expected bycatch. Dr. Stram explained that the fleet is investigating using deck sorting with results suggesting that bycatch mortality could be reduced by up to 50%, and explained that the fleet does move away from areas where halibut are encountered in high

numbers. It was noted that bycatch may be smaller than commercially legal halibut, and bycatch estimates in pounds may be underestimating the number of fish being killed. Dr. Stram noted that the Council is currently working with the IPHC to understand the impacts of incidental catch of small fish vs. larger fish. Dr. Stram also noted that halibut excluders, and other voluntary measures initiated by Cooperatives (behavioral changes, gear changes, timing, etc.) are also being implemented to reduce halibut bycatch. It was also noted that regulatory changes may not work as well or as fast as voluntary measures and a concern of the Council was to continue to seek cooperation and innovation from industry, rather than tightened regulations because of imprecise regulations and the difficulty in changing regulations once they are in place.

Discussion turned to the mortality of halibut bycatch, and how that compares to deck sorted halibut. Jim Armstrong discussed how discard mortality rates (DMRs) are calculated and applied to fisheries and noted that updated methods and data are needed. This led to questions about the surveys and results that Dr. Stram presented showing increases in small halibut in the annual survey and IPHC surveys showing lower abundance of larger fish, and how those different catch rates will be addressed in ABM. Dr. Stram responded that those questions are exactly what they have been working on; how to determine the best estimate of abundance for attaching fluctuating limits on the groundfish fishery. They are considering a range of abundance estimates that are tied to the fleet catching the halibut. She notified meeting attendants that additional information will be available in October.

Regarding movement of the fleet, residents stated that they were concerned about depletion of halibut in the areas near the islands where their small-boat commercial and subsistence fishing occur. Council representatives that we have little information about movements of halibut and whether closures in an area have any effects on local distribution of halibut.

There were concerns expressed regarding local community impacts as the halibut fishery is the largest employer on St. Paul Island, and the community depends on both the commercial and subsistence fisheries. Residents stated that they are anxious to see halibut numbers increasing, and impacts from bycatch decreasing. One resident also stated his support for the use of pots for halibut fishing as a way to address killer whale depredation issues, the speaker did not perceive a conflict on grounds between pot and longline gear. One resident was concerned about levels of radiation from Fukushima in local halibut.

Following this discussion Council vice-chairman, Bill Tweit, presented information on the development of the Bering Sea Fishery Ecosystem Plan. There were no questions or discussion.

A dance presentation from the St. Paul Island dancers and a community potluck followed the meeting. The Council representatives wish to thank the residents and community of St. Paul Island for their generosity and hospitality

St. Paul City Council

Council representatives met with the St. Paul City Council on June 26, 2016. Attending were City Council members Simeon Swetzof (Mayor), Brenda Jones (Vice Mayor), Jacob Merculief, Jason Bourdukofsky, Ray Melovidov, Richard Warner, City Manager Phil Zavadil, and others in the audience.

Mayor Swetzof introduced members of the City Council and provided an overview of the City's concerns. Mayor Swetzof also introduced a formal request from the City of St. Paul to expand the Council's

Ecosystem Committee and place Dr. Lauren Divine (Tribal Government of St. Paul Island, Ecosystem Conservation Office) on the committee. Mr. Tweit noted that he would discuss the issue with Council Chairman Hull.

Mayor Swetzof continued noting that previous Council action to rationalize the crab fishery was vitally important to St. Paul because it ensured that some crab would continue to be processed on St. Paul Island. Mayor Swetzof likened the importance of crab rationalization to the importance of the commercial halibut fishery to the community, stating that the personal and city income from commercial fisheries are the only way for the community to “weather the storm” of the State of Alaska budget situation. He noted that the discussions between the Amendment 80 fleet and the local directed halibut fishing fleet has been productive and being involved in the process is good for the community.

City Councilmember Jason Bourdukofsky commented that local fish taxes are extremely important to the city to maintain services for the public. There is concern that declining revenue will result in a declining population as families move away from St. Paul.

Mr. Zavadil commented that the fishing economy provides the economic base for St. Paul. When quotas decline, it becomes increasingly difficult for community members to remain on the island. If numbers get too small, schools close, as is happening on St. George. Other projects, including the language preservation project that the Council representatives learned about, would not be possible without the economic baseline provided by fishing.

Mr. Zavadil also noted that with regard to northern fur seals, the city and Tribal government have been working for more than 20 years to modify regulations that control the harvest of seals. He stated that the community has been working on ways to use traditional knowledge to apply an ecosystem approach to management of fur seals and fisheries. He noted that this is a good approach, but stated that it will take more work for the Council to be involved.

Later, Mr. Zavadil commented that he is concerned about the accuracy of subsistence harvest data from the State, as it may be used in the subsistence module of the Bering Sea FEP. He recommended working with co-management organizations as well as the State to obtain accurate subsistence harvest information.

Vice-Mayor Brenda Jones commented that the declines of crab and other animals (seals, birds) around the island is very alarming to residents of St. Paul. She stated that when crab populations around the island crashed people moved away because they could not find jobs on the islands. She noted that regardless of which decisions are made by the Council, the people on the Pribilof Islands are impacted.

Mayor Swetzof reiterated that although there is no longer money being generated from fur seal harvests, they remain important to the people of St. Paul as subsistence and cultural resources. Seal meat lasts through the winter, and many parts such as flippers and tongue are a delicacy in the community. Residents are concerned that because there is no longer revenue generated from fur seal pelts, the decline in the number of fur seals on the island is not recognized as a problem.

Mr. Tweit replied that the empty spaces at the fur seal rookeries that he had seen were very apparent to him. He stated that although the Council’s primary focus is commercial fisheries, the Council recognizes that actions have the potential to affect subsistence and community interests. He noted that when the Arctic FMP was established there was a clear statement that subsistence and science are primary concerns

before commercial fisheries are established; the Council needs to know that commercial fishing activities will not impact subsistence activities in the Arctic. The Bering Sea FEP is one of the tools to address potential community and subsistence impacts in the Bering. Mr. Tweit also replied to Ms. Jones that the Council is keenly aware of potential impacts on communities and the Council has recently approved formation of a Social Science Planning Team to provide more structure and better delivery of social science long-term objectives.

Council member Bourdukofsky noted that the City of St. Paul allocates some of the State Shared Fisheries Business Tax revenue to support programs on St. George Island because survival of both communities is important.

Council member Jacob Mercurief pointed out that although the city and residents are concerned about overfishing and bycatch, the community is also partnered with American Seafoods and receives great benefit from the partnership. Funding is provided for the school, elders' fuel costs, and crab and halibut are received from the association. Mr. Mercurief noted that St. Paul is concerned about halibut bycatch the same way that other Bering Sea communities are concerned about salmon bycatch.

Mr. Tweit thanked the City for the hospitality shown to the Council representatives and noted that these sorts of listening opportunities are rare for the Council, and are important to provide a better understanding of the community than can be obtained from regularly scheduled Council meetings. He also noted that visiting the Pribilof Islands allowed him to cross #1 off his bucket list.

Tribal Government of St. Paul Island Ecosystem Conservation Office

Council representatives met with the Tribal Government's Ecosystem Conservation Office on June 26, 2017. Present were Pamela Lestenkof and Dr. Lauren Divine (Co-Directors), Robert Melovidov, Greg Freitas, and Ron Philemonof.

Ms. Lestenkof and Dr. Divine provided an introduction and overview of the Tribal Government's Ecosystem Conservation Office (ECO). ECO was created in 1996 by Aqualina Lestenkof and Phil Zavadil to provide a tribal voice in marine mammal management and science decisions. The Tribal Government now has a co-management agreement with NMFS to manage fur seals.

ECO now has six people working for them, and are funded through 10 different grants to deal with issues ranging from wildlife management, to community health and wellness, and subsistence issues. They manage a herd of approximately 400 reindeer on the island and are working to develop a commercial meat option for sale at the local store. They have been collecting data from harvested fur seals and sea lions, and other "community-based monitoring" to detect ecosystem changes, and connect the community with visiting and local scientists.

Projects underway at ECO include:

- Bering Watch – a community based project to collect and monitor data including anomalous sightings, early or late arrivals or departures of migratory animals, and is associated with COAAST, a citizen-science effort. The Bering Watch project documented the mortality event of puffins and other seabirds on St. Paul Island last summer.

- Hunting safety – ECO offers a hunter safety course to teach locals ethical, safe ways to hunt the reindeer and other island resources to provide humane harvests and quality meat.
- Blue King crab project – ECO is working with other scientists with the goal to recover the blue king crab stock. ECO is building a new wetlab and offering diving opportunities and training.
- Salmon enhancement project – ECO is investigating options for developing a hatchery for salmon in the Salt Lagoon to provide opportunity for local harvest.
- Halibut bycatch project – ECO is collaborating with UAF (Carothers) and UAA (Reimer) on a project to document the community’s cultural and socio-economic dependence on halibut. The project is currently unfunded.
- Education Program (BSPICE) – a community youth based project to introduce students to STEM. Students buried an orca that washed ashore, and three years later rearticulated the skeleton. Local students are now achieving high standardized test scores in science.

Ms. Lestenkof provided a history of the Pribilof Islands fur seal harvests. The Aleuts were brought to the islands by Russian sealers to work the harvest and have been protectors of the seals here since that time. ECO works with NMFS to collect data from the harvest, such as body length, and collecting canine teeth for ageing. Although the demand for fur seals for subsistence has declined over time (954 seals in 1999 to 309 in 2016), the allocation hasn’t changed since 1986 (1,645). Rules regulating the subsistence fur seal harvest essentially adopted the commercial harvest rules (where, when, and how seals may be harvested). ECO would like to be able to manage the subsistence harvest for themselves, or liberalize the harvest regulations. An amendment package, including Environmental Impact Statement, is currently being prepared that addresses these requests.

Ms. Lestenkof and Dr. Divine stated that ECO would like to be involved in decisions the Council makes that may affect northern fur seals and other subsistence or island resources, and recommended that the Council use local knowledge in management decisions.

CBSFA

Council representatives met with the Central Bering Sea Fishermen’s Association (CBSFA) on June 27, 2017 at the CBSFA offices. Present were Phillip Lestenkof (President), Jeff Kauffman (Vice President), Ray Melovidov (CEO), Myron Melovidov (Chairman), Robert Melovidov, Roman Fratis, St., Rena Kudrin, Leilani Lesteniof, Shiona Melovidov, and Jason Boudukofsky.

Phillip Lestenkof and others provided a history of CBSFA, and the investments that CBSFA has made in the community. Sam Cunningham asked whether the local fishing fleet has had any trouble with killer whale depredation, as in other areas in Alaska. Mr. Kauffman reported that most of the whales around the island are mammal-eating whales and they have not experienced killer whale depredation. Mr. Kauffman also stated that none of the local boats are large enough to use pots for halibut fishing.

Mr. Tweit requested information about why St. George is a member community of a different CDQ group; why are the islands not in the same CDQ organization? Mr. Lestenkof explained that when the CDQ organizations were established, each village simply made a different decision. When the CDQ organizations were established, St. Paul had more vessels than St. George and that might have contributed to the decision.

Sam Cunningham commented that the Council is seeking ways to measure community health, and asked if CBSFA had any suggestions. Several people commented that the population of the village is a good measure of community health: when times are harder people leave the islands and when things are better, people return. Now there are trends of people returning to the island, things appear stable now. However, there is constant fear that the halibut allocation will get cut as the halibut fishery is a major part of the community economy. Funding from CBSFA has contributed to a Head Start preschool program, the school gym, subsidies for custom halibut processing at the Trident plant, and other community programs.

Until 2016, CBSFA was the local halibut buyer, operating as 57 Degrees North. They have now partnered with Trident to market halibut, and custom process halibut from the local fleet. CBSFA now owns more crab Processing Quota Shares (PQS) than they do crab CDQ. CBSFA aggressively bought quota to keep it community-based. However, the snow crab quota dropped and financial commitments on the purchased quota share are not insignificant. The feeling remains, however, that the community needed the PQS to remain local.

CBSFA values the relationship they have developed with Trident, and note that the relationship is delicate, complex, and important to the community. They note that it is unlikely that other processors could commit to remaining in the community long-term because of the variability in crab QS makes long-term planning difficult. There are not many other options for the local fleet to target; there is low value for salt cod coming out of the plant, \$.025/pound H&G. An economic analysis found that it is not viable for the small fleet to harvest Pacific cod because the value is so low. If there was no halibut, they might try, but it is unlikely that the plant would be able to remain open without halibut.

Mr. Lestenkof stated that the community is concerned about “lightning strike” events with halibut bycatch from the trawl fleet, but also noted that CBSFA is partial owner of American Seafoods, so they are also economically invested in trawling. They want the trawlers to be “stewards of the resource”, but are concerned that tight hard caps may make it harder for the trawlers to avoid halibut when the biomass recovers.

Mr. M. Melovidov stated that CBSFA appreciates what the Council is doing with the BS FEP to consider climate, gear types, etc. in management decisions. He stated that the FEP should directly involve communities, and should be a plan about the resource, and not about the industry, i.e., it should be a resource plan that allows for sustainable fishing, rather than a fishing plan that maintains a sustainable resource. A resource plan would consider conservation of other resources (marine mammal, birds, other fish, etc.) and sustainability of fishing and fishing communities.

TDX

Council representatives met with the Tanadgusix Corporation (TDX) on June 27, 2017 at the City Recreation Hall. Those present included Ron Philemonoff (CEO), Jason Bourdukofsky, Larry K, Tanya, Greg Fratis.

Mr. Philemonoff presented a detailed history of the TDX corporation and their activities. Mr. Philemonoff stressed the importance of the fur seals to the people of the Pribilof Islands, and their continued dependence on fur seals for cultural and nutritional needs. He stated that he believes that the root of the fur seal decline is their diet, there is a lack of food. He stated that overfishing and climate change are both contributing to the decline in the fur seals’ prey resources. Mr. Philemonoff also expressed his opinion

that the Council's Fur Seal committee would be the appropriate venue for fur seal issues to be discussed at the Council, rather than the Ecosystem Committee. However, when it was pointed out that the extant Ecosystem Committee is the fastest way for any northern fur seal issues to be taken up by the Council, because the Fur Seal Committee no longer exists, he was satisfied that those issues would remain high priority for the Ecosystem Committee and the Council.

Other meetings and tour opportunities

Mr. Michel Williams (NMFS, AKR) and Dr. Rolf Ream (NMFS, AFSC, MML), and Dr. Lauren Divine and Veronica Padula (Tribal ECO) accompanied Council representatives on Friday, June 23 to Vostochni rookery at Northeast Point while NMFS staff conducted repairs on research tripods. This provided a unique opportunity for Council representatives to view a northern fur seal rookery and facilities for northern fur seal research.

Council representatives accompanied Dr. Lauren Divine and Veronicas Padula on Saturday, June 24 to Southwest Point to observe seabird rookeries on the cliffs there. Saturday afternoon, the Council representatives toured St. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church, the TDX museum, and met with Aquilina Lestenkof to learn about a Tribal Government program to revive the Aleut language (Unangan Tunuu), and teach youth and adults on the island. Ms. Lestenkof and Mr. Phil Zavadil (St. Paul City Manager) lead a tour of historic and cultural sites on the island, including sites of several barabaras (semi-subterranean house sites).

Council representatives were also given a tour of Trident Seafood's plant by Mr. Bill Briggs, the plant supervisor. The tour provided opportunity to see the frozen halibut H&G and fillet operation in action. Council representatives wish to thank Mr. Briggs and the entire Trident plant staff for their hospitality, and would like to thank Trident Seafoods for providing meals for Council representatives while on the island.

Council representatives also had opportunity to attend an update on northern fur seal research and management presented to the community by NMFS staff on June 26, 2017, and a presentation on blue king crab research presented by Mr. Jared Weems, a Ph.D. student at the School of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Mr. Phil Zavadil took the Council representatives on a tour around the north side of the island aboard the Tribal government's search and rescue vessel.

Thanks to the community

Council representatives received wonderful hospitality from the people and community groups on St. Paul Island and from Trident Seafoods. The trip provided an invaluable opportunity for Council representatives to see and hear about the relationships that St. Paul residents have with resources in the community, including the cultural context that can often be (literally) lost in translation. Council representatives wish to express gratitude to those involved for facilitating an experience that was both enlightening and enjoyable.



Council representatives at the Community Presentation, St. Paul Island, Alaska. Photo courtesy of KUHB.



Council vice-chairman, Bill Tweit, speaks at the Community Presentation, St. Paul Island, Alaska. Photo courtesy of KUHB.



Council staff, Dr. Diana Stram and Jim Armstrong, speak at the Community Presentation. Photo courtesy of KUHB.



Audience members at the Community Presentation. Photos courtesy of KUHB.



St. Paul Island dancers at the Community potluck.



Northern fur seals, St. Paul Island.



Council vice-chairman, Bill Tweit and Council staff enjoying birdwatching on a balmy summer day on St. Paul Island.



Council visitors touring Trident Plant, St. Paul Island.