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United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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FWS/R7/AFES

Report # B-8: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Report to the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, December 2017.

The following information is a summary of the major updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) that the Service is involved in relation to the affairs of the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

I. Federal Subsistence Fisheries

Kenai Peninsula Federal Subsistence Fisheries Management

The Federal Subsistence Board (FSB) adopted regulations in January 2015 establishing community subsistence gillnet fisheries targeting sockeye salmon on the Kenai and Kasilof rivers within the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The Service has delegated authority from the FSB for in-season management of Cook Inlet Area federal subsistence fisheries. Since 2015, the Service has approved annual operational plans to implement a federal subsistence gillnet fishery for the Kasilof River. Implementation of a federal subsistence gillnet fishery on the Kenai River proved more complex and controversial resulting in a lawsuit filed by the Ninilchik Traditional Council contending that actions by the Board in 2015 did not provide all subsistence opportunities afforded by law. This lawsuit was settled with commitments by the FSB to ensure necessary regulatory actions governing the fishery are addressed to ensure its implementation. For the 2017 season, the Kenai River subsistence gillnet fishery was implemented through a temporary action approved by the FSB.

The federal in-season fisheries manager coordinated with local Alaska Department of Fish and Game management biologists and federally-qualified users beginning in early spring and throughout the summer in 2017. Subsistence fishery harvest opportunities were provided with the following gear types: dip net; rod and reel; and community gill net. Cumulatively, the three fisheries harvested 3,947 Sockeye, 2 Chinook, 12 Coho, and 19 Pink Salmon.

For further information on the settlement, contact Mr. Greg Siekaniec, Regional Director, at gregory_siekaniec@fws.gov (907-786-3542). For further information about the federal in-season management, contact Mr. Jeff Anderson, Kenai Fish and Wildlife Field Office Supervisor, at jeffry_anderson@fws.gov (907-260-0132) within the Fisheries and Ecological Services Program.

II. Migratory Bird Management

Update on Seabird Mortality Events and Monitoring

During June to September 2017, the Service received reports of higher than normal dead and dying seabirds from the Bering and Chukchi regions. Specifically, carcasses were observed from Point Hope south to Bristol Bay, with highest onshore counts recorded near Nome. This is a food safety concern to coastal communities as well as an indicator of possible changes in ocean conditions. Local responders and agency personnel have counted nearly 1,600 beached seabird carcasses since early June 2017. Recovered bird carcasses were sent to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) National Wildlife Health Center where cause of death for nearly all birds was determined to be emaciation, similar to the common murre that had died in the Gulf of Alaska in 2015-2016. The majority of dead birds in this year's mortality event were northern fulmars and short-tailed shearwaters (which are abundant in the region during the summer), but a wide range of species have been affected. Additional species found dead or lethargic included crested auklets, black-legged kittiwakes, murrelets, gulls, tufted and horned puffins, and others; these species include birds that eat primarily zooplankton as well as those that eat primarily fish. To date there is no microscopic or laboratory culture evidence of infectious disease, with one exception; a single horned puffin collected at the Bering Land Bridge National Preserve tested positive for Bisgaard taxon 40, a bacterium associated with pneumonia and septicemia in seabirds, and was the presumptive cause of death.

In October 2017, the USGS Alaska Science Center and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Beaufort Lab completed testing of tissues from 17 seabird carcasses for biotoxins (saxitoxin and domoic acid) associated with harmful algal blooms. Results indicate that birds were exposed to saxitoxin via the marine food web, but levels detected do not provide clear evidence of acute toxicity as a cause of death. Gastrointestinal tract samples from three fulmars had concentrations ≥ 12 $\mu\text{g}/100$ g, with a concentration of 63 $\mu\text{g}/100$ g in one bird from St. George Island. As most carcasses had no stomach or gastrointestinal tract contents for testing, liver and muscle tissues were also tested to provide some inference on exposure to biotoxins. Liver samples from five fulmars (including two of the birds with elevated levels detected in gastrointestinal contents) had detectable levels of saxitoxin, ranging from 1.6 – 5.9 $\mu\text{g}/100$ g. There is no available research on rates of excretion, tissue routing, or sensitivity to saxitoxin in birds, and we are unable to determine the specific timing of exposure and what effects, if any, these concentrations may have on seabirds. The Service has posted an updated one-page information sheet on the 2017 mortality event, linked via our Home page (https://www.fws.gov/alaska/index_archive.htm) or access directly at: https://www.fws.gov/alaska/pdf/BeringSea_DieOff_Info_September2017Update.pdf.

For further information, contact Ms. Kathy Kuletz, Seabird Coordinator, at kathy_kuletz@fws.gov (907-786-3453) within the Division of Migratory Bird Management.