



Decades of Decline

1742

The northern (Steller) sea lion is "discovered" by George Wilhelm Steller.

1956-60

Worldwide Steller sea lion abundance is estimated at 240,000 – 290,000. An incomplete survey of Steller numbers in Alaska finds 140,000 animals. Although the species ranges across the north Pacific rim from California to the Korean peninsula, the centers of greatest abundance are found in Alaska from Kenai Peninsula in the central Gulf of Alaska to the central Aleutian Islands.

1964

Japanese factory trawlers pioneer a new on-board processing technology which converts pollock to surimi (a protein paste) and remove 175,000 metric tons of pollock from the eastern Bering Sea in the first year. Pollock is an abundant North Pacific groundfish, and is a primary prey for sea lions, fur seals, harbor seals and some seabirds.

1972

Japanese and Soviet factory ships remove a record 3.6 billion pounds of pollock from the eastern Bering Sea.

1970-76

Over 20 billion pounds of pollock are extracted from the eastern Bering Sea by foreign factory trawlers. In the same period, the first large declines of the Steller sea lion are recorded in the eastern Aleutian Islands.

1985

Approximately 68,000 adults and juveniles are counted at Steller rookeries from Kenai Peninsula to Kiska Island in the central Aleutians. This constitutes a 48% decline from the population count of 1960.

May 1988

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) proposes to list the Steller sea lion as "depleted" under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) after determining that the population of sea lions in most of Alaska was below 50% of the sea lions observed 1956-60.

1989

Surveys of northern sea lion rookeries indicate that the population in the Kenai-to-Kiska portion of the sea lion's range has plummeted to about 25,000 animals. In the core of the range in the eastern Aleutian Islands, Steller numbers plummeted from 50,000 to about 3,000.

An internal NMFS memo obtained by Greenpeace in a Freedom of Information Act request notes that Steller sea lion declines first occurred in the eastern Aleutians and moved eastward and westward as large-scale trawling was introduced into these areas. In areas of southeast Alaska, which do not have intensive trawl fisheries, no comparable sea lion declines are observed.

November 1989

On behalf of 16 groups, including Greenpeace, the Environmental Defense Fund petitions the Secretary of Commerce to list the Steller sea lion as endangered under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

April 1990

NMFS publishes an emergency rule listing the Steller sea lion as a threatened species under provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

December 1990

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council proposes an 82% increase in the pollock quota in the Gulf of Alaska, as well as an increase in the eastern Bering Sea pollock quota.

June 1991

NMFS issues a biological opinion stating that a 40% increase in the Gulf of Alaska pollock quota is "not likely" to jeopardize the Steller sea lion.

July 1991

On behalf of Greenpeace, the Sierra Club (now Earthjustice) Legal Defense Fund files a suit in U.S. District Court in Seattle asserting the Commerce Secretary's and NMFS' failure to ensure that the pollock quota in the Gulf of Alaska is not jeopardizing the Steller sea lion.

January 1992

NMFS extends no-trawl buffer zones from 3 to 10 nautical miles (nm) around protected sea lion rookeries in Alaska, extending to 20 nm around 5 rookeries in the eastern Aleutian Islands in the winter. Although Steller sea lion foraging ranges for pregnant females are known to extend to 80 nm or more in winter, NMFS rejects a proposal to extend no-trawl zones around rookeries to 60 nm in winter months, citing "significant socioeconomic dislocation."

Following the removal of 6 million metric tons of pollock by factory trawlers between 1986-1990, the international waters of the central Bering Sea (known as the Donut Hole) are depleted and closed to fishing. A similar moratorium on fishing is declared in the depleted pollock fishery around Bogoslof Island.

June 1992

Aerial surveys from trend sites in the Gulf of Alaska indicate a 70% decline in sea lion populations in the central Gulf from 1985-92, following intensive fishing for spawning pollock near Kodiak Island in the mid-1980s. Steep declines in harbor seal populations on Tugidak Island, south of Kodiak, are recorded during the same period.

June 1994

Aerial surveys indicate a continuing decline in sea lion numbers in the central Gulf of Alaska of 21% and an overall Gulf decline of 10% from 1992-94. Data from the Aleutian Islands show a 13% decline between 1992-94, with a 29% decrease in sea lion numbers in the western Aleutians in areas where intense fishing for Atka mackerel occurs—a primary Steller sea lion prey in that region.

October 1995

NMFS proposes to uplist the western (Kenai-to-Kiska) portion of the Steller sea lion stock from "threatened" to "endangered" under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

June 1996

Aerial surveys confirm continuing sea lion declines of more than 17% in the Gulf of Alaska. The population in the Aleutian Islands appears to have stabilized, but only after experiencing an overall decline of 85% from estimated numbers in 1956-60.

October 1996

NMFS misses its October 4 deadline for uplisting the western Alaska Steller sea lion population as endangered.

November 1996

Ignoring survey data which indicate a 50% decline in pollock abundance, a team of government fisheries scientists fails to recommend a precautionary reduction of the pollock quota in the eastern Bering Sea. The proposed quota would remain at 2.4 billion pounds for 1997.

May 1997

NMFS uplists the western portion of the Steller sea lion stock from "threatened" to "endangered", but proposes no new conservation measures to stop the continuing decline.

December 1997

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council approves, and NMFS accepts, a 60% increase in the groundfish quota for the Gulf of Alaska and only minor reductions in the Bering Sea pollock quota for 1998.

April 1998

Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund and Trustees for Alaska, on behalf of Greenpeace, American Oceans Campaign, and Sierra Club-Alaska, file suit against NMFS for violating the Endangered Species Act and its requirements to protect animals listed as "endangered", and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), for failing to prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) on the groundfish fisheries for the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska.

December 1998

NMFS issues a biological opinion on the Steller sea lion, which declares that the pollock fisheries are adversely modifying the Steller sea lion's critical habitat and jeopardizing the continued existence of the western portion of the sea lion stock. To remedy the adverse modification and eliminate jeopardy, NMFS issues draft "reasonable and prudent alternatives" (RPAs) on management for the pollock and Atka mackerel fisheries. NMFS also issues a slapdash SEIS in an attempt to comply with NEPA.

January 1999

NMFS issues final RPAs that are weakened even further from the politically "compromised" RPAs that had been issued in draft. The end result is that the RPAs in place for 1999 do not represent a real change from previous management of the fishery. Therefore, they neither mitigate the adverse modification of Steller sea lion critical habitat nor eliminate the jeopardy threat to the species.

July 1999

U.S. District Court Judge Thomas Zilly in Seattle finds the final RPAs "arbitrary and capricious" because NMFS failed to explain how the measures prevent adverse modification of the Steller sea lion's critical habitat, or insure that its continued existence will not be jeopardized. It is the first time that a federal judge has ever found that an agency's RPAs violate the Endangered Species Act. Judge Zilly also holds that the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement rushed to completion by NMFS is inadequate in scope as a matter of law, because it fails to adequately consider the individual and cumulative environmental impacts of the groundfish fisheries on the North Pacific ecosystem.

August 1999

Greenpeace, American Oceans Campaign, and Sierra Club-Alaska, relying on NMFS' own statements, ask Judge Zilly for an injunction restricting pollock fishing both inside and outside Steller sea lion critical habitat for the remainder of the 1999 fishing season.

October 1999

Judge Zilly denies the requested injunction, but warns NMFS that if their revised RPAs do not protect Steller sea lions, the agency will have "serious problems." NMFS issues "Revised Final RPAs" shortly thereafter. Once again, the measures appear to be focused more on protecting the fishing industry than avoiding jeopardy to Steller sea lions or adversely modifying their critical habitat.

November 1999

NMFS withholds a number of key documents containing internal criticism of the Revised Final RPAs. Greenpeace is forced to ask the judge to compel the agency to turn over the documents.

December 1999

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council increases the pollock quota for 2000 in the eastern Bering Sea by almost 15%, to 2.28 billion pounds.

January 2000

Two weeks before the parties are scheduled to enter court-ordered mediation, Judge Zilly holds that the 1998 Biological Opinion meant to assess the individual and cumulative effects on Steller sea lions of the entire groundfish fishery, including pollock, Atka mackerel, and Pacific cod, is also inadequate in scope as a matter of law. Zilly states that the agency's "analysis is admittedly incomplete and the conclusions inconclusive" and finds that NMFS is therefore in "continuing violation" of the Endangered Species Act. Despite this fact, the agency allows the fisheries to continue operating. The parties are unable to agree on a mediated resolution of the litigation.

March 2000

Greenpeace, American Oceans Campaign, and Sierra Club-Alaska file a motion for injunctive relief, asking the Court to protect Steller sea lions from the effects of the industrial trawl fleet by closing all areas designated as sea lion critical habitat to groundfish trawling. This action will protect sea lion populations from the still unknown individual and cumulative effects of trawl fishing on sea lion prey.

April 2000

Judge Zilly rules that NMFS has illegally withheld 23 documents relating to the preparation of the Revised Final RPAs and orders them turned over to Greenpeace. As expected, the documents reveal that NMFS's own experts believe that many of the measures in the revised RPAs have more to do with protecting the short-term interests of the industry than in safeguarding Steller sea lions.