

Recommendation for Protection of the Northern Bering Sea

Briefing Paper for the White House Tribal Nations Conference December 16, 2010

Changes in the Northern Bering Sea

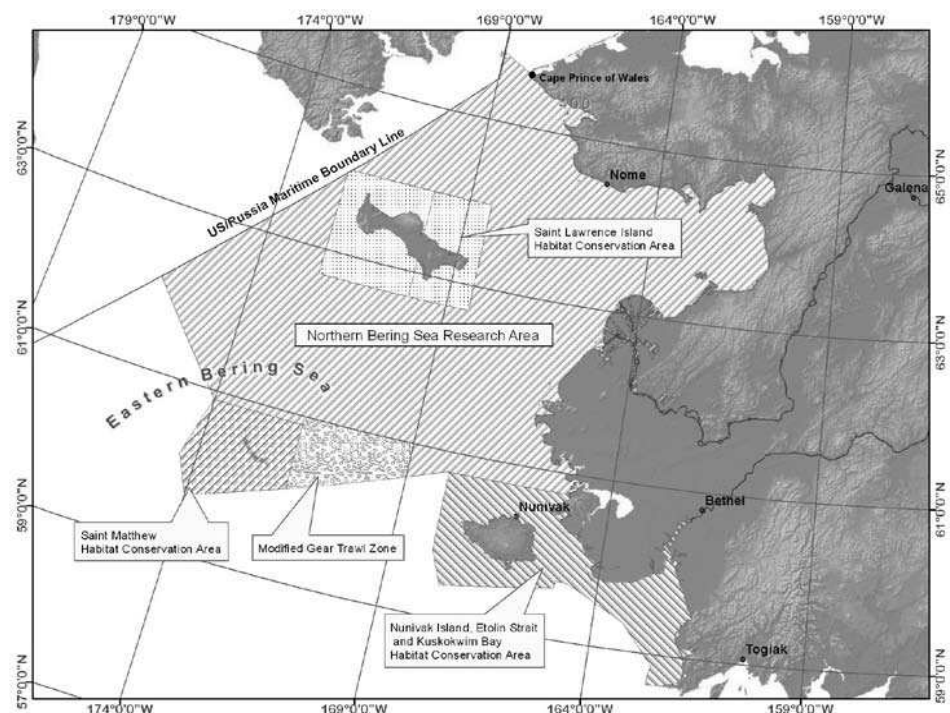
The Earth's climate is warming. Alaska Native people living on the Bering Sea coast, keen observers of the world around us, are witnessing changes in seasonal patterns, sea ice and animals. In recent years Bering Sea ice has formed later in the year and melted earlier in spring. In some years even when the ice extends far to the south, it is thin. These changes affect where different animals find food, how they survive and where they may be available to us for subsistence.

Alaska Native observations are echoed in scientific research findings. Warming is changing the Northern Bering Sea ecosystem from an arctic to a sub-arctic ecosystem.¹ Fishery scientists have documented a northward shift of 45 fish species into the Northern Bering Sea.² While ocean temperatures and ice conditions in the Bering Sea vary greatly year-to-year, the trend over time is expected to be warming.³

Overtime commercially valuable fish are expected to occupy increasingly more northern waters, enticing large-scale fishing fleets to expand operations into new areas.

Background on Federal Fisheries Policy

In 2007, the Secretary of Commerce approved a decision by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council to establish a northern bottom trawl boundary as a



Long-term protection from bottom trawling is needed in the Northern Bering Sea.

precautionary measure to prevent movement of fleets northward beyond their current footprint. Among fishing practices, bottom trawling is widely considered to have the most habitat impacts and highest bycatch. The Alaska Fisheries Science Center is developing a research plan to study the effects of the gear in the Northern Bering Sea and has begun conducting bottom trawl surveys in the region to measure abundance and distribution of benthic marine life. Based on this research, fishery managers may develop a plan that allows northward expansion of bottom trawl fishing.

Concerns of the Tribes

Alaska Native tribes on the Bering Sea coast are strongly concerned about the potential for future expansion of bottom trawl fisheries into the Northern Bering Sea because of the sensitivity of the whole ecosystem that supports our ways of life. Turning the Northern Bering Sea into an industrial fisheries zone will harm this unique region and the subsistence hunting and small-scale fisheries that our tribes depend on.

The teaching of our ancestors was based on respect for what the ocean provides. Respectful actions are rewarded by hunting success; disrespectful actions have negative consequences. We were taught never to waste what the Creator has given us, to share our food with the community and to listen to our Elders because they acquired wisdom over a long life and sharp observation. Today, while technology has changed, our traditional values and desire to live a subsistence way remain the foundation of our culture. Respect for the natural world and caring for our resources are key to our ability to thrive off the ocean and land.

We know from long experience that when there is conflict between industrial fisheries and tribal interests, federal fishery managers are biased in favor of accommodating industry. A heavy burden of proof is placed on tribes to show that an activity will irreparably damage subsistence resources.

For decisions affecting the Northern Bering Sea, we offer our perspective and recommendations:

- 1. The tribes urge NOAA to establish a rigorous tribal consultation process for the Northern Bering Sea.*
- 2. Arctic peoples living along the Bering, Chukchi, Beaufort, East Siberian and Greenland Seas have always relied on whales, seals, walrus, fish, shellfish, and birds. Cultural practices and lifeways have developed around these marine resources. Despite pressure to assimilate to Western ways, indigenous people have chosen which of these new ways to accept and continue*

to rely heavily on the land, sea and air for food resources and the continuation of cultural practices. Any action that threatens the opportunity to successfully harvest from the ocean because industry is viewed as more important to the world economy would be an immeasurable loss to our people and to the world as a whole.

3. *Mandate special protection for the Northern Bering Sea. This region warrants special attention by the Administration because of its unique ecological and cultural characteristics:*
 - *The Northern Bering Sea is vulnerable to the destabilizing effects of climate change. The long-term consequences of climate change for the region are unknown. Allowing industrial-scale fisheries into the region will add new stress to the already fragile ecosystem and the subsistence resources we depend on.*
 - *The Northern Bering Sea is already fully utilized by the tribes who have been thriving off of the ocean's bounty for 10,000 years. Our local economies are based on active subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering, and small-scale fisheries that will be damaged by the introduction of bottom trawling.*
 - *The Northern Bering Sea is not currently an industrial zone for natural resource extraction such as minerals or large-scale fisheries. This is an opportunity to designate the Northern Bering Sea as a zone dedicated to subsistence and research that brings together western science and traditional knowledge for continued understanding of climate change, and its impact on marine life, ocean habitat, communities and cultures.*

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¹ Grebmeier, et al. 2006. A major ecosystem shift in the northern Bering Sea. *Science*. Vol. 311, Mar. 10, 2006.

² Mueter, F.J., and M.A. Litzow. 2008. Sea ice retreat alters the biogeography of the Bering Sea continental shelf. *Ecological Applications* 18:309–320.

³ Overland, J. 2010. Fisheries in the Bering Sea *in Arctic Report Card* 2010.
<http://www.arctic.noaa.gov/reportcard>.