



ICE SEAL CO-MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES FINAL

4 FEBRUARY 2021
 9:00AM
 ZOOM ONLINE

- 1. Call to Order**
 9:10 am, Chairman Adams called the meeting to order

- 2. Invocation**
 Taqulik Hepa gave the Invocation

- 3. Roll Call**
 A Co-management Committee quorum has five members

Ice Seal Committee		PRESENT	ABSENT
Bristol Bay Native Association	Sam Gosuk	X	
	Heidi Kritz	X	
Association of Village Council Presidents	Jennifer Hooper	X	
	Albert Simon		X
Kawerak, Inc.	Brandon Ahmasuk		
	Benjamin Payenna		X
Maniilaq Association	Cyrus Harris	X	
	Emerson Moto*	X	
North Slope Borough	Billy Adams	X	
	Joe Mello Leavitt		
*Attended the Ice Seal Committee Co-management Committee meeting by phone			
Total		6	

Ice Seal Committee		PRESENT	ABSENT
Executive Manager	Andy Von Duyke	X	

National Marine Fisheries Service		PRESENT	ABSENT
Assistant Regional Administrator, Alaska Region	Jon Kurland	X	
Program Manager, Polar Ecosystems Program	Peter Boveng	X	
Biologist, Alaska Region	Barb Mahoney	X	
Total		3	

4. Meeting Logistics

Executive Manager Von Duyke explained that due to COVID concerns the meeting was conducted virtually with Zoom. There are limited Zoom features, please speak up if you want to be heard.

5. Introductions

Others in Attendance	
National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Region	Shawn Carey
National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Region	Kristin Ciecziel
National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Region	Tammy Olson
National Marine Fisheries Service , Marine Mammal Lab	Michael Cameron
National Marine Fisheries Service, Marine Mammal Lab	Heather Ziel
NSB, Department of Wildlife Management, Director	Taqulik Hepa
NSB, Department of Wildlife Management, Deputy Director	Nicole Kanayurak
NSB, DWM, Subsistence Research Specialist	Frances “JakyLou” Olemaun
North Slope Borough, Mayor	Harry Brower*
*Attended the Ice Seal Committee Co-management Meeting by phone	

6. Dispense with “Robert Rules of Order”. Proceed by consensus

Adopted, but really not required because the Committee proceeds by consensus

7. Select a Chair

The ISC (Chairman Adams) chaired the Committee meeting in 2020; NMFS (Jon Kurland) chaired the meeting in 2021

8. Adopt the Agenda

The Co-management Committee adopted the agenda unanimously

Mayor Harry Brower, former ISC Vice Chairman, provided opening comments:

“Greetings to the ISC Co-management Committee members. It has been awhile since I attended the ISC meetings. Happy New Year. We are all dealing with the pandemic and finding that new technology is useful, with new struggles and new means to communicate. We need to pay attention to Alaska Native organizations, different communities, and changing environments. We need to pay attention to ice seals and think about the food that is harvested from the ocean, encompassing other resources as well. For example, with ice seals, we need to consider their food/prey and what the ice seals can catch/find to eat. Look at the life cycle of multiple species, ecosystem monitoring, and the die-off of: birds, fish, invertebrates, etc. Many issues surround coastal communities, including Arctic shipping. These changes keep increasing, increasing, and increasing, yet we are still at the same level for federal and state identified research. We need to include locals and need to identify the health of seals. These are still in the periphery of any biological assessment of ice seals.” Mayor Brower could continue, but stopped here.

- 9. Approve the 2020 Ice Seal Co-management Committee meeting minutes (21 Jan)**
Peter Boveng and Barbara Mahoney sent clarifications, edits, and typos directly to the ISC Executive Manager Von Duyke. These suggested edits will not alter the meaning of the ISC Co-management Committee meeting minutes.

10. NMFS Alaska Region Updates

- **Decision regarding petition to delist the Arctic subspecies of ringed seal under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)**

Jon Kurland stated that NMFS received a petition in March 2019 to delist the ringed seals from the State of Alaska, Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, and the North Slope Borough.

NMFS announced a negative 90-day finding on a petition to delist the Arctic subspecies of ringed seals. This was published in the Federal Register on 27 November 2020 (85 FR 76018). NMFS sent the Federal Register Notice to ISC Chairman Adams and Executive Manager Von Duyke. NMFS response was delayed because of the necessary reviews and approvals. NMFS found that the petition did not contain substantial new analysis or new information to demonstrate that de-listing may be warranted. There was no information to indicate that our prior determination (to list ringed seals under the ESA) was in error.

- **Initiation of 5-year review for bearded and ringed seals (comments due 26 Mar 2021)**

NMFS will review status of the endangered Ladoga subspecies of ringed seal (Lake Ladoga, Russia) and the threatened subspecies of bearded and ringed seals. This review is to see whether any changes are warranted in the listing status of these populations (downgraded, upgraded, or de-listed).

At the same time that NMFS announced a 90-day negative finding to delist the Arctic subspecies of ringed seal, NMFS announced plans to initiate a 5-year review of the ringed seal (Arctic subspecies, Baltic subspecies, Ladoga subspecies, and Okhotsk subspecies). NMFS shared this information with the ISC Chairman Adams and Executive Manager Von Duyke. Separately, on 13 January 2021, NMFS announced plans to initiate a 5-year review of the threatened Distinct Population Segments of bearded seal (Beringia, Okhotsk). NMFS shared this information with the ISC Chairman Adams and Executive Manager Von Duyke.

NMFS seeks public comments and information to assist in the review of listed bearded seals and ringed seals to see if any changes in their listing status is warranted. Comments are due on 26 March 2021 for the bearded and ringed seals. However, NMFS will continue to accept information after the due date (26 March) because we will not disregard relevant information pertaining to the listed ice seals.

Chairman Adams requested the new attendees to the ISC Co-management Committee meeting introduce themselves.

Ice Seal Committee		PRESENT	ABSENT
Kawerak, Inc.	Brandon Ahmasuk	X	

Others in Attendance	
World Wildlife Fund, Anchorage	Elizabeth Kruger
NSB, Department of Wildlife Management, Wildlife Biologist	Kayla Schemreif

Brandon Ahmasuk stated that ice seal critical habitat should include nearshore estuaries, which are just as important or more important to ice seals, than the current proposed critical habitats. Nearshore estuaries provide important areas for seals, particularly young seals, to learn to fish, act as nurseries, and protection from storms. NMFS suggested taking Brandon Ahmasuk’s question during the critical habitat discussion that was next on the agenda.

- **Proposal to designate critical habitat for bearded and ringed seal under the ESA**
 - **Public comment period closes on 9 March 2021**
 - **Public hearings (virtual) will be announced in Federal Register**
 - **Final critical habitats will be designed by 15 March 20**

Tammy Olson (NMFS) provided a slide show on the proposed critical habitat for bearded and ringed seals. NMFS will host three public hearings on 23, 24, and 25 February.

Jon Kurland informed the ISC that due to the pandemic, there was no choice but to host these public hearings by telephone. NMFS is operating under a court order with scheduled dates, so there is no time to delay the critical habitat process that would allow for face-to-face meetings (after COVID). Public hearings by telephone may not be the best scenario for public engagement, but it is the best we can do under the circumstances.

Chairman Adams requested the new attendees to the ISC Co-management Committee meeting introduce themselves.

Others in Attendance	
Alaska Department of Fish and Game	Justin Crawford
Marine Mammal Commission,	Vicki Cornish

Brandon Ahmasuk questioned NMFS about designating important nearshore habitats.

Tammy Olson responded that currently the shoreward edge of the proposed critical habitat for bearded and ringed seals is at the Mean Lower Low Water.

Brandon Ahmasuk is concerned that the proposed critical habitat should include nearshore estuaries, like Safety Sound. These estuaries are just as important, or more important, than sea ice. Seals use these estuaries in spring, summer, and fall. Seals use estuaries to avoid storms and we get more storms all the time. Young and sub-adult seals use the estuaries for feeding areas and these areas are very important of young seals becoming adult seals. Brandon Ahmasuk recommended that inshore and nearshore estuary areas are included as critical habitat.

ISC Chairman Adams stated that the pandemic has changed the world. Many people remain indoors. Many people do not have the luxury to attend these meetings and voice their concerns. It is important for people to have opportunities to voice their comments. It is difficult for Chairman Adams to agree with the way this is occurring. Many people do not know about critical habitat. NMFS needs to inform people of these public hearings by mail, radio, and social media. It is unfair to designate all that water as critical habitat because it is unfair to communities trying to better themselves. In the Arctic, there is lots of problem with erosion, with community meetings with the Corps of Engineers to remedy the erosion problem. Communities have been here for thousands of years. There are still places with honey buckets. Communities want lights, running water, and water treatment services, which is important for their economies. Timing when animals' use areas is important. Some ringed seals birth pups at a very young age. Subsistence use of hides is related to timing, seasons, and seals' live stages. Pups wean in two months and are off on their own. Proposed critical habitat describes a huge body of water, 24 hours/day. Timing can be worked out. North Slope Borough needs a whole lot of things, like fuel, groceries, and the cost of living is very high. The proposed critical habitat is almost as big as the state of Alaska. People need to have the opportunity to comment on animals that are important to communities. Thank you

Jon Kurland stated that NMFS would prefer to hold meetings in some of the affected communities, but cannot travel because of the pandemic. Critical habitat designation has no effect on subsistence hunting. The only direct regulatory consequence from critical habitat is a process for federal agencies that fund, issue permits, and/or are the agency doing the work to consult with NMFS to be sure their actions do not adversely modify (affect) the critical habitat. There is a common concern that critical habitat means you cannot have a port or hunt, and that is not true.

Chairman Adams reported that there are millions of ice seals and that it is mind boggling to have these seals listed under the ESA. Indigenous people are regulated with a quota on bowhead whales that they hunt. There is a looming quota on the polar bear harvest. Locals are worried about hunting quotas on belugas, walrus, and ice seals. Once critical habitat is designated, while we are losing so much ice, people might use critical habitat as a tool to regulate Alaska Natives. It is the perception of the rest of the world.

Jon Kurland said he heard the concern of Chairman Adams. NMFS does not see the subsistence hunt as a threat to ice seals. If, years from now, there is a need to regulate the harvest, NMFS will work with the ISC to address that.

Taqulik Hepa stated there were additional costs to listing the ice seals. Locals should attend the public hearings to be sure their concern about their resources are heard. There are costs with listing the bearded and ringed seals. Recovery Plans are required with listing under the ESA and the ISC wants to be at the table, which will have associated costs. It does not seem that the ESA works for Arctic species. There may be 1 million seals in 2020, which are adaptable and very healthy; but reports say seals should be listed under ESA. There are no funds provided by the federal government, but there are costs to local people that live in Alaska. What effects will critical habitat have on local development? What effects will critical habitat have on coastal erosion repairs, including harbors, seawalls, etc.?

Executive Manager Von Duyke questioned the logistics of the critical habitat public hearings. While attending public hearings, he observed the misunderstandings that occurred. The logistics of public hearings is a listening session for the federal government. However, people need to know that critical habitat does not influence subsistence. Radio call-in programs do a good job presenting information and allowing discussions with call in questions. With public hearings (virtual and in-person), regulations require NMFS to accept comments for the record (and not answer questions), on the proposed critical habitat.

Sam Gosuk asked if the proposed critical habitat for bearded and ringed seal affect their food (i.e., cod, herring, and shrimp). Would the critical habitat designation allow plans for food/prey used by the bearded and ringed seals?

Jon Kurland referred to slide #9 that identifies essential features of critical habitat for listed species and primary prey species. Primary prey species for bearded seals are benthic organisms, which include invertebrates; and primary prey species for ringed seals are arctic cod, saffron cod, and shrimp. When a federal agency (e.g., Corps of Engineers) consults on listed bearded and/or ringed seals, they also look at the effects to prey species in critical habitat.

Sam Gosuk reported that all seals go after herring in the spring. In the spring, while hunting for ringed seals, he saw a bearded seal with lots of herring around. In the fall, the seals eat salmon. Young bearded seals will swim up the rivers.

Jon Kurland stated that NMFS has limited prey information, but it is known that seals will eat different prey species at different locations and different seasons.

Nicole Kanayurak asked what NMFS' plans are after the public hearings, if critical habitat does not affect industry and subsistence. How will NMFS engage the ISC? The ISC has lots of knowledge on ice seals and it might be helpful to have some meetings.

Tammy Olson stated that NMFS does not expect many changes with this critical habitat designation. Federal agencies and federal projects will consider critical habitat effects and the necessary measures to protect the critical habitat.

Tammy Olson looks forward to the ISC comments and information that will be compiled and submitted to NMFS on the proposed critical habitat.

Tammy Olson stated for the five-year status review there is no time limit and the ISC will have opportunities to engage with NMFS. If the ISC provides new information and new sources of Traditional Knowledge, NMFS will be incorporate that information in the final report.

Taqulik Hepa looked at Slide #5 on critical habitat designation using the best available scientific data and questioned how NMFS will incorporate local Traditional Knowledge. Sometimes science does not match with local knowledge, and usually the hunters are right. Local knowledge is very valuable and should have some weight because hunters have years of experience and are on site year-round.

Jon Kurland stated that NMFS recognizes local knowledge is important and welcomes comments that reflect traditional knowledge.

Brandon Ahmasuk had a concern because in the email correspondence on the public hearings the call-in number was listed. A flyer will help spread the word on these public hearings, including dates and phone numbers.

Heidi Kritz stated that it would be helpful and respectful to include Traditional Knowledge in the critical habitat designation.

Peter Boveng stated that there are many Traditional Knowledge and local knowledge topics mentioned here that could be incorporated into the five-year status reviews. Peter Boveng's group is involved with the five-year status reviews and would like to engage the ISC on these reports. The ESA five-year reviews use the best available science and Traditional Knowledge is very much a part of the best available information/science. Traditional knowledge helps to insure data quality and it is helpful to have sources that are available to be sure the information is incorporated. There are ways to incorporate information that hunters share. Workshops are a good way to incorporated information that are not necessarily in written reports.

Executive Manager Von Duyke agreed that it is good to document Traditional Knowledge and local knowledge. The ISC website provides a form that people can document their observations. The ISC is just now scratching the surface with their independent dataset, but the more information collected the more information that will be mined.

11:08 am

Ice Seal Committee		PRESENT
North Slope Borough	Joe Mello Leavitt	X

Mayor Brower thanked NMFS for the information on critical habitat designation. This conversation identified communication gaps and data gaps. The critical habitat show the US border and the military exemption. We need monitoring and research on ice seals. Communication is an enterprise that will affect important prey species. The AEWC is concerned about the port access route. What tools will the ISC use to be sure the port access route will not affect subsistence communities? Yet actions are caused by federal courts. Need to access the community level of impacts. There are pros and cons to this type of designation. There are multiple reasons to identify single species, but with multiplying affects by the federal government actions. What are the tools for smaller communities providing comments and feedback at the request of NMFS? The military has an exclusion zone. The proposed essential features (slide #9) is snow covered sea ice that provides shelter for pupping. With this explanation, who verifies this statement? Arctic shipping, climate change, coastal erosion all lead to a train wreck. Bearded and ringed seal critical habitat is for a segment of the water.

Joe Mello Leavitt stated that the ice seems to go to the Beaufort Sea and not the Chukchi Sea. The ice is so far out.

BREAK

11:30 am
Return from break.

Others in Attendance	
Van Ness Feldman LLP	Tyson Kade*
*Attended the Ice Seal Committee Co-management Meeting by phone	

11. 2021 Action Plan

- **Includes actions and information needs to promote conservation and co-management of Alaskan ice seal populations for subsistence**

Barbara Mahoney presented the 2021-2022 Action Plan with updates and corrections from the 2020-2021 Action Plan. There were no comments on the Action Plan as presented. The 2021-2022 Action Plan with track-changes and without track-changes (clean) will be emailed to the Ice Seal Co-management Committee. Comments and edits will be due by 1 March 2021.

Ice Seal Committee		PRESENT
Kawerak, Inc.	Benjamin Payenna	X

12. Closing Comments

13. Adjourn

Adjourned at 12:03 pm.