

Northstar Island Ringed Seal Surveys
Presentation to the Ice Seal Committee
Jen Dushane 907-777-8549, jdushane@hilcorp.com
Hilcorp Alaska
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Hilcorp conducts oil and gas operations at the Northstar Production Facility (Northstar). Northstar, an artificial gravel island, is located in State of Alaska coastal waters about 9.7 kilometers (km) (6 miles (mi)) offshore from Point Storkersen in the Beaufort Sea. Water depth at the island is about 12 m (39 ft). This region is covered by landfast ice in winter and with water depths greater than 3 m (10 ft).

Each year during the ice-covered season, an approximately 11.7 km (7.3 mi) long ice road is constructed between Northstar and the Prudhoe Bay facilities at West Dock to transport personnel, equipment, materials, and supplies. Ice roads allow standard vehicles such as pick-up trucks, SUVs, buses and other trucks to be used to transport personnel and equipment to and from the island during the ice covered period.

Building, maintaining, and using ice roads/trails may incidentally expose ringed seals occurring in the vicinity to elevated levels of sound, human presence on ice habitat, and interactions with heavy machinery, thereby resulting in incidental take. Hilcorp obtained a five year Incidental Take Regulation (ITR) from National Marine Fisheries Service in 2020 for ringed seals. This authorization specifies mitigation measures that help reduce the potential for harassment of ringed seals.

Mitigation measures include driving slowly on a clearly delineated ice trail, avoidance of ringed seals within 50 m and ringed seal structures within 150 m. One of the main mitigation measures required by the ITR are surveys of ringed seals along the ice trail every other day starting March 1st. Observers are provided training on how to identify ringed seals and ringed seal structures. Hilcorp requests Ice Seal Committee (ISC) review of the identification slides to understand if hunter knowledge regarding how to identify ringed seals and their structures should be added to the training.

Observers travel the ice trail continuously monitoring for seals but also stop every ½ mile for five minutes to locate and document any ringed seals. At the ½ mile mark, snow depth measurements are taken off of the ice trail to contribute to other snow depth measurements used to understand ringed seal habitat by the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management (NSB DWM) and the ISC.

The purpose of this presentation is to present an overview of the Northstar facility, ice trail location, mitigation measures and results of the seal surveys and snow depth measurements. Briefly, the results from the data collected indicate that very few ringed seals are present within 50 m of the ice trail, with the majority occurring at distances of 150 m or more. Most ringed seal observations occur in late April and May. Snow depth is fairly uniform along the trail, with a range of 3 – 11” and a mean of 6”. No Level B or Level A takes of ringed seals have been recorded since 2020. The mitigation measures appear to be effective at minimizing disturbance of ringed seals along the ice trail.

Hilcorp welcomes any guidance from the ISC on the training, surveys, and mitigation measures required under the ITR.