

Workshop on conducting fieldwork and protecting food security

Ice Seal Committee & Marine Mammal Laboratory - Mar 3, 2023

NOAA Fisheries, Marine Mammal Laboratory

The Marine Mammal Laboratory's (MML) goal is to complete our co-management monitoring responsibilities while mitigating any potential risks that the work might have to food security for Native Alaska communities. The goals of this workshop were to begin an open dialog among project leaders and community members to determine how best to conduct field research on ice seals in Alaska while improving upon fieldwork goals and increasing our service to communities.

The workshop began with a review of current protocols in place to guide mitigation efforts for research cruises and aerial surveys. These include maintaining buffers around some coastal communities, avoiding walrus haul outs and any hunting activities on the ice or in the water, and providing daily communication with over 200 communities and individuals about our location and planned activities. Aerial surveys were then used as a case study and survey approaches were reviewed along with communication plans prior to, during, and following surveys. Three small groups composed of Ice Seal Committee members and hunters along with one MML representative discussed the current mitigation protocols and communication approaches, and shared knowledge on local areas of interest where aerial imagery may be helpful to increase hunter safety and provide information on species of concern. Feedback from those small group discussions is summarized below.

The MML understands that each representative participating in this workshop was providing their own opinions and recommendations and was not necessarily speaking for others in their communities.

Regular communication with communities should include:

- Flyers & Radio; utilizing regional hubs
- Participation at Regional Advisory Councils
- Contact with tribal councils before 'showing up' to work
- Meetings with whaling captains associations (AEWC and local)
- Visits to schools

Priorities for communication leading up to the field season:

- Keep ANOs informed
- Multiple community meetings (Bering Sea for 2024 surveys)

Communication during the aerial surveys should:

- Recognize that closer approaches require tighter communication
- Designate points of contact within each community
- Be flexible
- Use local time (no GMT)

Areas of interest and concern to workshop members:

- All Regions
 - Nearshore seals in early April – see about coordinating surveys within the buffers
 - Everyone would be interested to hear about any unusual observations.
- Bristol Bay
 - Interest in presence of fish in nearby rivers or river mouths
 - Bristol Bay Tongue point sees lots of seal pups. Also reports of ringed seal pups on the beaches, good idea to increase survey density there.
- Bering Strait
 - Nearshore estuaries should be surveyed (Port Clarence, north and east of Nome)
 - Review the completed report by Kawerak: “Bering Strait Marine Life and Subsistence Use” for other insights
- North Slope
 - Kotzebue interests may include currents and wind driven ice movement and flocks of eiders (can’t fly over but could report).
 - Reports of people seeing bearded seals denning off Barrow

The workshop closed with an expression of appreciation for ISC engagement, open exchange of ideas, and guidance. There was a recognition that the current mitigation practices were effective but that more could be done (e.g., surveying within buffers, and providing locally-important information in near real-time) with increased planning and communication.

MML Action Items from the workshop include:

- Identifying points of contact, best timing, & locations for Bering Sea community meetings
 - Bristol Bay: April or Oct-Nov are the best months.
 - Bristol Bay Regional Advisory Committee meeting (March 8-9)
 - BBMMC meeting (likely May 8)
 - YK-Delta: April or Oct-Nov are the best months.
 - AVCP 26 tribes are coastal, need to identify stand-out communities for marine mammal concerns,
 - AVCP can help MML engage with tribes
 - YK Delta Regional Advisory Committee (April 4-6)
 - Bering Strait: March or Oct-Nov are the best months.
 - Seward Peninsula Regional Advisory Committee (March 22-23)
- Give presentations at other meetings: AEWC, ABWC, EWC, etc.
- Follow up with Ice Seal Committee, perhaps at the next ISC meeting. Earlier is better!