

Ice Seal Committee – 2024 Fall Meeting

September 30, 2023 (9:00 am to 1:00 pm) – Virtual

Meeting link <https://meet.google.com/bmj-hteh-bby>

Join by phone 224-408-1143 **PIN** 937497291

1. **Call to Order (9 am)**..... Billy Adams – ISC Chair
- A. Invocation
- B. Meeting Logistics (drop Robert’s Rules unless voting)..... ISC Executive Manager
- C. Introductions

Note that the first part of the recording did not work and so some info was lost. This list of attendees is based on who actually was detected on the recording.

- Andy Von Duyke
- Barbara Mahoney
- Michael Cameron
- Heather Zeal
- Barbara Mahoney
- Peter Boveng?
- Michelle Fournet
- Justin Crawford
- Caroline Cummings
- Sam Gosuk
- Jennifer Hooper
- Timothy Smith
- Cyrus Harris
- Billy Adams
- Joe Mello Leavitt
- Tyson Kade
- Donna Hauser

2. **Roll Call**..... *Quorum = 6 members¹*

Ice Seal Committee		Present	Absent
Bristol Bay Native Association	VACANT		X
	Sam Gosuk	X	
Association of Village Council Presidents	Jennifer Hooper	X	
	VACANT		X
Kawerak, Inc.	Charles Menadelook		X
	Ben Payenna		X
Maniilaq Association	Timothy Smith	X	
	Cyrus Harris	X	
North Slope Borough	Billy Adams	X	
	Joe Mello Leavitt	X	
TOTAL			

QUORUM

3. **Approval of Agenda**..... ISC
- Dr. Donna Hauser has requested to present early due to later scheduling conflict. ([link](#))

This portion of the meeting was not captured on the recording. The link connects to Dr. Hauser’s written summary.

¹ ISC By Laws – Article IV – Section 4.5: “A majority of the members of this Working Group, when present at any meeting, shall constitute a quorum”

4. **Minutes from 2024 ISC Spring Meeting**.....ISC Executive Manager
- A. Draft ISC Board Meeting minutes were sent out to the ISC members on 17 Sep 2024.
- B. Draft Co-Management Meeting minutes sent out to Co-Management Committee on 17 Sep 2024.²
5. **Reports / Updates**.....ISC & Guests
- Website update / email issues

AVCP Regional Report

Jennifer Hooper – Wet and gray fall. Cold mornings with a lot of fog. Has no info regarding seal hunting, not even in the spring and summer. Hunting seemed to do well with no concerns. Fishing is mixed...Kuskokwim doing better than the Yukon. Chum came back a little stronger than others, but weather affected the fishing. People did pretty well with moose hunting. People getting ready for the fall and winter. Lots of rain and high water, which hampers activities. Water has stayed high for a long time. Traditional fall storms are early. Several pretty big storms increased water height on already high levels. Filling vacancies on the ISC will be challenging, similar issues with other co-management bodies.

Maniilaq Regional Report

Cyrus Harris – Cyrus Harris went first. Did not go on the ice in the spring. His son was on the ice and most trips were successful. Reported that the ice was more normal. Couple successful ugruk hunting trips. Summer weather was similar to AVCP with higher than normal water, back to back storms, prevailing east winds, no salmon (next to nothing), and lots of wind and rain. Recent north winds finally dropped the water levels. A hunter in Sisualik reported dead ugruks on a stretch of beach west of Sisualik. The hunter mentioned observing a research vessel in close proximity to the dead ugruk. NOAA contacted Cyrus, but he did not read it. Dead ugruks were fresh (1 was buried by a bear already). By the time Cyrus checked them out, they were already buried by a bear. He concluded that bears like to have aged meat rather than a fresh kill. The bear did consume the seals eventually. No answers forthcoming on what happened. Cyrus observed another unusual boat (little red boat). Apparently, a survey vessel. Uncertain about why the survey occurred that time of year (September – fall). This is an important period for YOY ugruk migratory movements to the shallows. High water, lots of rain, low salmon.

Timothy Smith – Did not have much to add. He spent most time on the tundra. Reiterated about poor salmon returns.

North Slope Borough Regional Report

Joe Mello Leavitt – Good year. Happy to have caught one ugruk. Lots of high waters. Mostly west winds in the summer. He caught 4 caribou. Good fishing. He misses going to his fall camp because it's getting more difficult to get to the cabin (whitefish spawn Sept 23 – Oct 8). Later will go after trout and grayling. Lots of hunters got their seals. Good to be out on the ocean.

Billy Adams – He echoed what Joe had to say. Good hunting. Saw lots of bearded seals and lots of healthy ringed seals. Wet, gray, rainy, high water. Recently, the water level dropped quite a bit. Fishing has changed a bunch over the years.

² No vote to authorize until after all Co-Management Committee members have had a chance to correct/revise.

Regional reports from BBNA and Kawerak were not on the recording.

6. Unfinished business

- A. ISC membership vacancies.....ISC
There are currently are two vacancies in the ISC roster. Alternate members should also be recruited for each region.

Tabled till Spring 2025

- B. Requested resolution.....ISC and Kawerak
In the 2024 ISC Spring Meeting minutes, Chuck Menadelook requested an ISC resolution in support of a Nome based lab to more readily receive analytical results from stranded marine mammals, sick birds, and other issues related, but not limited to, HABs and/or HPAI.

Tabled till Spring 2025

- C. Subsistence Harvest Report Update ([link](#)).....Justin Olnes (ADFG)

Shared an update on the ice seal harvest report. It is a “living document” that is compiled from all available harvest data on ice seals throughout Alaska. This was last approved by the ISC in 2019. The new version contains harvest data from Wainwright in 2009, Buckland 2018, Hooper Bay 2018, and Tununak 2018. Justin provided the draft, with a disclaimer about consulting with ISC before using data. Document demonstrates the value of ice seals as a subsistence resource and also track trends over time. This document is a central clearinghouse of the data. Justin was requesting approval of the updated document and hopes that it can be shared on both the ADFG and ISC websites.

Sam Gosuk asked about bearded seal seasonal harvest info. Justin replied that the data are not seasonally specific. He also noted that there are very limited resources for collecting the data. The data are collected from a select few communities during a select few years, with a long gap in time since the most recent publicly available ice seal harvest data was collected...specifically:

- NSB 2014
- Maniilaq 2018
- Kawerak 2017
- AVCP 2018
- BBNA 2011

The current document is general. ADFG is working on figuring out how to get better information in the future.

Barbara Mahoney asked about the number of villages included in the document. Justin replied that the current document includes nearly 50 communities. However, many communities have inconsistent reporting, with a great deal of variability from community to community. Barbara did note that even though there is inconsistency, it is good to document that ice seals are important to a large number of communities.

Billy emphasized that this documentation has been undertaken for a long time. This is valuable and helpful information. ISC meeting has a quorum. Billy asked whether the ISC would like to

approve the report. Joe Mello Leavitt moved to approve the report. Seconded by Cyrus Harris. None opposed. Approved.

Justin closed by requesting further information to add to the report. He also requested a follow-up discussion about harvest documentation at the 2025 ISC Spring Meeting.

Andy asked if ADFG had reached out to Brian Person at NSB regarding more recent ice seal harvest data. Justin replied that Brian noted that there have been difficulties and inconsistencies in the documentation at NSB and so the data in the (now approved) report is the most recent and accurate. Andy asked if Brian Person had suggestions about what it would take to get better reporting. Justin suggested that is a challenge and needs to be discussed by the ISC. The methods undertaken by ADFG have not been working recently. Andy mentioned that there is a growing use of IK documentation (AAOKH, ISN, etc), which may be helpful for informing harvest reporting. Echoed the need to discuss this at the next meeting 2025 ISC Spring Meeting.

NOTE: This report is now posted on the ISC website at the following link:
https://www.iceseals.org/files/ugd/bc4c23_6997555a650541a5b0dda5be934915a7.pdf

D. NETS summary.....Lauren Divine (Aleut Community of St. Paul Is.)

Lauren Divine is not on the call. Andy mentioned that Lauren was willing to provide an update on the NETS study, but there was not much new to report.

7. New business

A. Research

1) UAF update ([link](#)).....Donna Hauser

see note above

2) NOAA Marine Mammal Lab

• Vessel work ([link](#)).....Heather Ziel

Heather provided a summary of the research cruise in the Bering Sea in April-May 2024. Their goal was to sample and tag seals on the ice. Cruise lasted 15-April and lasted 32 days. All of their time was spent west of St. Matthew Island. Good vessel and crew got the team into good ice. Total 25 (11 ribbon and 14 spotted seals). Deployed satellite tags on 20 seals (9 ribbon and 11 spotted). SPLASH GPS tags and SPOT flipper tags. No SPOTS on young of year. SPLASH only if seal molted already. Heather also provided summary info on the seal movements, behaviors (e.g., diving), and oceanography (e.g., water temperatures). Biological samples were also collected from captured seals, morphometrics, and habitat data. Environmental DNA is being analyzed to look for prey species. PCR tests for viruses were negative. Serology tests indicate that seals were exposed to pathogens.

Joe Mello asked whether bearded seals were observed and targeted. Heather replied that none were observed by NOAA.

Barbara Mahoney asked about the quality of the sea ice and how it compares to “normal”. Heather reported that the sea ice was more “normal” than 2018. She did not notice great changes in the ice over other years.

Sam Gosuk also asked whether bearded seals were observed. Heather said no. Michael Cameron elaborated that NOAA rarely sees bearded seals at the southern edge of the sea ice where they typically operate. If they could have gotten farther north, then they might have expected to see bearded seals.

- Aerial surveys ([link](#)).....Dr. Michael Cameron

Michael Cameron gave presentation on behalf of Erin Moreland, who could not attend due to a scheduling conflict. In 2025 NOAA will use two aircraft to survey the entire coastline of Alaska where ice seals can be found. Aerial surveys will use sensor mounted in the belly of the aircraft. Data will be able to be analyzed at a later date by other groups. Goal is to complete survey prior to seal northward movements with retreating sea ice (avoid double counting). Design will center effort around solar noon to observe the maximum number of seals hauled out on the sea ice. Satellite tag data will help to estimate the number of seals in the water and not visible. Surveys will be 6-April to 15-June. Bering, Beaufort, and Chukchi Seas will be surveyed simultaneously using the NOAA King Air and a Twin Otter aircraft. Flight lines will be 100-300 miles from shore. Flight lines will be spread out. Flights will be at 1000 feet altitude to minimize disturbing animals. Instruments include infrared, visible color, and ultraviolet (helps to detect polar bears). Airspeed will be 150 knots. Anticipate that surveys will last about 3 weeks. Methods will be used to avoid disturbing subsistence, walrus groups, and eiders. Radios will also be monitored for messages from subsistence hunters. Emails will be sent to communities describing working area and methods to contact NOAA. Thirty-mile buffers will be maintained around communities, but this is negotiable under certain conditions (e.g., discussions with Barrow Whaling Captains Association). Seeking input from residents of Gambell and Savoonga. In 2024, a few small surveys were conducted in June. Issues with aircraft pilots, mechanics, and aircraft availability necessitated a smaller effort. Though not a full survey, it was good for a shakedown and refining their methods. Many meetings held with groups and communities over the past year, and Michael Cameron encouraged people to reach out to NOAA for more information. Continued communication will commence with efforts before, during, and after the surveys (including results).

Another topic – working with Alaska Native participation: some work during the later phase of the aerial work. Regional variation in how communities wanted to participate. In the south was interest in more participants in total, and in the north fewer participants for longer. Two ways in the future: one person for 1-2 trips (aerial) – requires online training. Longer flight efforts require dunker training by participants. This all requires lead time to prepare before the next ISC meeting.

Joe Mello Leavitt asked about how soon the data will be used for a population count? Michael responded that the proper analysis of these data requires time and the development of new statistical methods. NOAA anticipates that analyses will require 1-2 years (much shorter than a decade as in the past). Joe pointed out that good abundance info is important to avoid quotas. Michael is unaware of any discussions regarding quotas for ice seal harvest.

Andy brought up the issue of how best to pay Alaska Native participants. Michael suggested discussing during monthly call in meetings.

Billy mentioned that each region is different with respect to how busy people are due to their subsistence requirements. This will need to be considered when seeking AK Native help.

3) UNH Bearded seal acoustics update ([link](#))..... Dr. Michelle Fournet

Michelle was excited to report that she and her grad student Rachel deployed hydrophones in Bristol Bay (Togiak). Rachel did get to spend time at local schools. Hydrophones were retrieved in Utqiagvik. Data are being analyzed. Two locations in Alaska where bearded seal acoustics are being monitored. The focus of work is on bearded seals, but it can also detect other seal species and a more comprehensive effort will be developed in the near future.

Billy was looking forward to hearing more in the 2025 ISC Spring Meeting. Michelle mentioned that in one year there will be Togiak data to discuss.

4) NOAA ringed/bearded seal recovery plan ([link](#))..... J. Malek & C. Cummings

Caroline Cummings is the bearded seal recovery coordinator. Jenna (ringed seal recovery coordinator) could not attend. Recovery plans are ESA mandated, but are **non-regulatory**. The recovery actions are **voluntary**. Hope is to get as many members of the ISC to participate in the upcoming recovery planning workshop. Dates are 23-24 January. Encouraging participation by ISC, asked whether the dates will work, and solicited questions about the workshop, recovery, etc.

Andy reminded the ISC about the dates for the 2025 ISC Spring Meeting. Andy asked for the approach that is planned for the workshop and mentioned how it worked for a similar process during the polar bear recovery planning efforts. Emphasized that biologists and hunters differ in how they communicate. Caroline responded that NOAA will have two expert facilitators. No agenda has been drafted to date. General vision is to share background with ESA process and requirements, threats, and how to approach recovery in the context of extreme environmental change. Open discussions, presentations, and a diverse array of methods to share and synthesize information. Agenda is still in the works.

Andy emphasized the helpfulness of getting a draft agenda to aid some attendees with getting their travel approval. Hybrid/virtual meeting may be necessary for those who cannot make the dates. Caroline mentioned that NOAA looking for meeting space.

5) Other comments, concerns, and/or new business

- Critical Habitat court decision..... Tyson Kade & ISC

Tyson provided an update on the recent court decisions vacating critical habitat. Errors were made that violated the ESA. Generally, a lack of a good explanation for why an entire area was indispensable to survival and recovery, and also did not explain what efforts foreign nations are taking as part of the determination of US critical habitat, and the lack of accounting for not accounting for exemption requests by State of Alaska and NSB. Two critical habitat designations were vacated and remanded back to NMFS to address highlighted flaws. Uncertain what next steps will be: appeal to 9th circuit or simply re-propose.

Andy asked about the upcoming process. What will it look like? Asking because he felt like the process with working between NMFS and ISC could have gone much better.

Tyson stated it could look like a decision on whether to pursue an appeal to the judge's decision (9th circuit) which could play out over a couple years. Center for Biological Diversity may also get involved. At minimum, NMFS needs to provide a better explanation, a new proposed rule, public comments, and a final rule. There may be more opportunities for the ISC to weight in.

Anne Marie Eich commented that NMFS is working on it and has nothing further to add at this time, but will provide info as it becomes available.

B. ISC 2025 Spring Meeting ISC

1) Date **24-26 Jan 2025**

Michael Cameron asked for clarification from a previous meeting about shortening the ISC Co-Management Committee meeting and considering the workshop as part of it. Andy also asked for specific dates. Barbara chimed in. During this discussion it was still planned to be a 5-day meeting (workshop + ISC) ← see comment at end of the minutes.

Long discussion about marathon seal meetings and its impact on attendees ← see comment at end of the minutes.

2) Location **Anchorage, AK**

Jennifer Hooper does not like meeting downtown and would prefer not be stuck downtown for a long period. Parking is very expensive. Suggested focusing on the workshop and ISC meeting primarily. Jennifer recommends a location match the ISC and recovery planning workshop.

Billy mentioned the Embassy Suites, Residence Inn, and Dimond Center, all of which have free parking.

Barbara Mahoney asked to read the comments that were written on the virtual meeting site:

- Donna Hauser: Suggest the BP Center and Residence Inn (adjacent). Low cost for tribal and community-oriented organizations.

Caroline Cummings mentioned that she has reached out to Hilcorp regarding the BP Center and so said to standby for more info.

Andy mentioned how difficult it is to schedule meetings and hopes that the January dates can be kept. Andy also reacted to the fact that this workshop is part of a public meeting and expressed concern that a public gallery may be intimidating to hunters, that CBD may use info for their own purposes and against hunters. Andy was also confused that the workshop was a public meeting. In contrast, the polar bear workshop was not “public”. It seems odd that a working meeting would be public. Maximizing the value of the information shared by hunters may not be possible in such a setting.

3) Hotel preference? Logistics...

- Captain Cook (AMSS location)
- Embassy Suites
- Girdwood (low gov't rates)
- Residence Inn
- Meet at BP Building
- other suggestions?

- 4) 2-day Ringed / Bearded Seal Recovery Workshop.....requested by NOAA
 - Prior to 2025 Ice Seal Co-Management Committee meeting..... **22-23 Jan 2025**
 - Logistics? Funding? Virtual?

8. Executive Session

A. Review resolutions to Authorize ISCISC

1) Letter affirming current ISC reps
Request that each regional entity send an updated letter affirming the name of their current selected ISC representatives and alternates, and/or any replacements or filled vacancies.

2) Sample resolution to authorize ISC
Request approval and plan to travel dates to each Regional Entity. Goal is to work with Regional Entities (first), then move on to Tribal authorization. Meeting dates need to be set³ or this objective will not get accomplished.

B. By Laws – discuss (executive session).....ISC

Revised ISC By-Laws sent to ISC members prior to the meeting. Changes include updates requested at the ISC Strategic Planning meeting. Added conduct code for ISC travelers. There are still things to consider, so a formal vote cannot be held at this meeting. Suggest that we set a date for E-Vote prior to the 2025 ISC Spring Meeting.

9. Adjourn

Note that, since this call, the dates for the workshop changed from 22-24 January to 23-24 January, 2025. This means that the ISC meeting changed from its normal 3-day format to a 2-day format, with 0.5 days devoted to a shortened Ice Seal Co-Management Committee meeting and 1.5 days for a shortened ISC Board Meeting.

As of January 3, 2025, no agenda has been developed for the recovery planning workshop.

³ Could this also be a good time for NOAA recovery coordinators to meet at regions? For example, have an ice seal-oriented portion at meeting that includes resolution to authorize, and then discuss recovery planning?