



NOAA
FISHERIES

Ringed and Bearded Seal Recovery Planning Process Updates – March 2026

NOAA Fisheries held a recovery planning workshop in late January 2025. All members of the ISC board attended and provided input.

Workshop Highlights

- A general overview of recovery plans and the recovery planning process were provided to participants
- There were in-depth discussions of the different types of recovery criteria (performance measures that need to be achieved for delisting to occur) and breakout groups brainstormed potential delisting criteria for ringed and bearded seals
 - Biology-based/demographic criteria: measure species performance over a biologically significant amount of time
 - Examples of biology-based criteria suggested (in no particular order of importance):
 - Body condition of ice seals (as measured by blubber thickness, lipid density, quality of oil, or other parameters) indicates sufficient prey is available and is not limiting ice seal population growth or recovery.
 - Sufficient habitat exists such that the population can successfully conduct life history functions throughout the species' current range through the foreseeable future (through 2100), that allows for:
 - Bearded seals: sea ice that supports critical life history periods, specifically, in March/April-early June (pupping, nursing, maturation, molt), and that occurs over shallow water (<500 m) to ensure access to foraging grounds during these critical life history periods
 - Ringed seals: snow drifts of sufficient depth for the construction of subnivean lairs by March (average snow depth accumulation of >20 cm, ice structures to create pressure ridges, and snow drifts of 45 cm to allow for sufficient excavation; persistence of snow lairs throughout the pup maturation period (April-early June))
 - Threats-based criteria: focus on reduction of threats that could lead to species decline
 - Examples of threats-based criteria suggested (in no particular order of importance):
 - The majority of coastal communities have shorefast ice during their traditional hunting seasons such that 90% of coastal communities maintain access to healthy seals.
 - Management actions sufficiently address noise disturbance, removal of prey by fisheries (targeted and bycatch), habitat destruction, interactions with marine debris, and other impacts to prey species such that they are available in adequate quantities for ice seals.

- Breakout groups also brainstormed recovery actions (site-specific management actions needed to achieve the recovery criteria) for some of the recovery criteria. The recovery actions specific to environmental variability and sea ice decline were prioritized by participants.
 - The top priorities based on participant votes were:
 - Sustain and strengthen the ISC to build relationships and ensure adequate input and expertise in ice seal management decisions. (46 votes)
 - Incorporate local experts into study designs; improve/continue coordination amongst partners. (33 votes)
 - Conduct on the ground observations (i.e., community level input) to obtain more fine-scale data on sea ice/snow conditions to identify regional differences in habitat use across the species' range. (25 votes)
 - Methods for data collection include the development of a phone app to collect information and photos and/or household surveys within subsistence communities to gain feedback on the condition of harvested seals and the environment
 - Conduct research on ice seal habitat requirements to understand how sea ice loss is impacting ice seals over time; make the connection between sea ice and snow cover and vital rates/population level effects. (23 votes)
 - The other categories of recovery actions discussed included:
 - Noise
 - Health and disease
 - Vessel traffic
 - Oil and gas
 - Fisheries interactions
 - Predation
- Using the information collected during the workshop, NOAA Fisheries is continuing or working towards the following activities:
 - Conduct monthly co-management meetings with ISC regarding recovery planning and other ice seal issues;
 - Draft the Beringia DPS bearded seal and Arctic ringed seal Recovery Plan outlines
 - Outreach to additional regional hubs and communities, including a presentation on recovery planning at the Strait Science lecture series;
 - Additional virtual public meetings, as needed;
 - Draft the Beringia DPS Bearded Seal and Arctic Ringed Seal Recovery Plans and Recovery Implementation Strategies (RIS)
 - Release the Recovery Plans for peer review and public comment
 - Incorporate comments and finalize Recovery Plans and Implementation Strategies
 - Work with partners to implement recovery actions