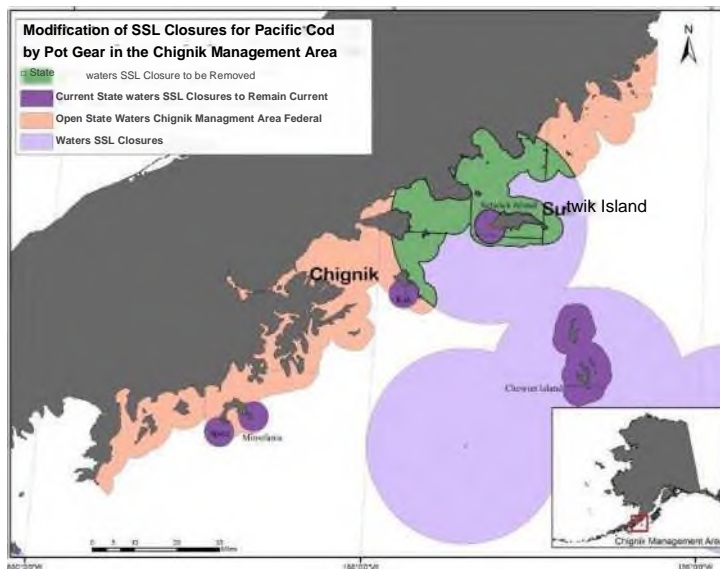


Chignik Advisory Committee
 c/o Rachel Allen, Secretary
 P.O. Box 84
 Chignik, AK 99564

Simon Kinneen, Chairman
 North Pacific Fishery Management Council
 1007 West 3rd Ave., Suite 400
 L92 Building, 4th floor
 Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Chairman Kinneen and Council members:

The Chignik Advisory Committee requests that the Council initiate a discussion paper on a regulatory proposal to decrease the Steller Sea Lion closure around the haulout on Sutwik Island from 20 miles to 3 miles.



The Alaska Board of Fisheries took action during its March 2017 meeting to reduce the Steller Sea Lion (SSL) no fishing zone around the haulout on Sutwik Island from 20 miles down to 3 miles for pot gear vessels participating in the Chignik area parallel Pacific cod fishery. NMFS conducted an ESA section 7 consultation and determined that “the proposed action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, the SSL WDPS or designated critical habitat.” That quote, and the map at left, are taken from the NMFS letter to the Board of Fisheries dated September 30, 2016.

The remaining problem which the Board of Fisheries cannot resolve and only the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council can address is that Chignik cod fishermen who hold Federal Fishing Permits (FFP's) still cannot fish in the federal cod fishery inside 20 miles of the haulout at Sutwik Island because the federal Steller Sea Lion restrictions remain at 20 miles. This was not anticipated by the local cod fleet of the Chignik area when they asked the Board of Fisheries for relief and, in fact, the Chignik Lagoon cod fisherman who submitted the Sutwik Proposal to the board of fisheries holds an FFP and has been unable to fish in the area he fought to have opened.

It is highly unusual for SSL haulouts to have 20 mile closures. The only ones created anywhere were put in the waters of the Chignik area and it is notable that no Chignik representation was present at the Council meetings when these decisions were made. Previously, a 20 mile closed area around Kak Island's SSL haulout was reduced to 3 miles (Final Rule Dec. 20, 2004) and that closure included a very large portion of Chignik Bay and very nearly reached the dock at the City of Chignik. Now only one such 20 mile haulout closure area remains in the state - the one at Sutwik Island. This biologically unnecessary closed area continues to reduce the traditional flexibility of local Chignik residents and other federal FFP holding fishermen to participate in the federal cod fishery. Even rookeries with greater SSL populations than at Sutwik Island have 3 mile closures (for cod fixed-gear) in nearby

fishing areas.

This lack of traditional flexibility for the local FFP holders to participate in the federal cod fishery near Sutwik Island has contributed to the economic distress in the Chignik area communities. Therefore, one objective of this proposal is to relieve economic distress in the communities of the Chignik area while not jeopardizing the recovery of Steller Sea Lions. The Chignik communities, which have been largely dependent on the salmon industry, are struggling to remain economically viable; restoring a measure of the historical flexibility to engage in the federal cod fishery by reducing the SSL closures around the Sutwik Island haulout will be a significant help to the local FFP cod fleet and to the local economy.

Not only the communities of Chignik will benefit; FFP holders from other communities that traditionally fish for cod in the federal waters outside Chignik will benefit as well. The effort has generally been low and the effort is unlikely to increase much from the increased fishing area in this one location very near to Chignik.

One objective of this proposal is to allow a fishery, yet continue to protect Sea Lions from potential localized food depletion resulting from fishing activities. It seems very likely that 3 mile closures around the Sutwik Island SSL haulout will provide undiminished and adequate protection for SSL. The 2001 BiOp telemetry data indicate that SSL's appear to remain within a few nautical miles of shore for most of the year. This suggests that 3 mile closures should preserve the primary SSL foraging areas around Sutwik Island.

This problem will not be resolved without council action. Only the council has the authority to recommend changes to this no fishing zone for holders of FFP's. Without Council action local communities will continue to suffer under closures that unnecessarily restrict fishing opportunities for Chignik FFP holders when a 3-mile closure is all that is needed to provide adequate SSL protection and would restore significant and traditional fishery opportunities for local Chignik Area residents and be a significant benefit to the small local economy. Local small boat FFP holding fishermen who want to be able to take advantage of the traditional flexibility of fishery options by participating in the federal fishery will continue to be frustrated and constrained unless the Council acts. There are no available fishery opportunities that sufficiently mitigate against the loss of the traditional flexibility of being able to participate in the federal cod fixed-gear fisheries near Chignik that has been caused by the 20 mile closures around the SSL haulout at Sutwik Island.

The small increase in cod harvested (in absolute terms not relative terms) in previously closed waters around the Sutwik Island SSL haulout will be insignificant with regard to any negative impact on SSL. It seems reasonable to assume that Chignik's fixed-gear cod fishing fleet has much less impact on local cod populations than would a trawl fishery. Sea Lions would not lose.

Please take action to initiate a discussion paper on a regulatory proposal to decrease the Steller Sea Lion closure around the haulout on Sutwik Island from 20 miles to 3 miles.

Most sincerely,



Alfredo Abou-Eid, Vice-Chairman for the Chignik Advisory Committee