

Bering Sea & Aleutian Islands - Marine Mammals

Population Trends of Steller Sea Lions in Bristol Bay, Alaska

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Steller sea lions were once abundant along the North Pacific Rim; however, over the past three decades the Alaskan segment of the western stock has declined by over 80%. In 1997, the western stock was classified as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Currently there is a paucity of data available on the number of Steller sea lions hauling out in Bristol Bay. Given that oil and gas development is being considered in Bristol Bay, and on-going, large-scale commercial fisheries have been active in the region for decades, it is important to understand Steller sea lion population trends in this area. We compiled and analyzed count data collected from May through August at Round Island and Cape Newenham, two primary haulouts in Bristol Bay. The number of sea lions observed at Round Island declined 3.7% / year between 1988 and 2007, while counts at Cape Newenham declined 9.1% / year between 1990 and 2005. Numbers generally peaked in May then declined through August. Peak counts may be associated with large herring spawning events that take place in nearby Togiak Bay and Security Cove. Caution should be used when interpreting these declines, as we have not yet definitively determined that the observed declines are not partly influenced by distributional changes; however, given the large documented decline throughout the western stock, it is likely the reported declines are real.



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