

to, a request for the following information:

- Type of commercial shark permit possessed;
- Past participation and availability in the commercial shark fishery (not including sharks caught for display);
- Past and present availability to participate in the shark research fishery year-round;
- Ability to fish in the regions and seasons requested;
- Ability to attend necessary meetings regarding the objectives and research protocols of the shark research fishery; and
- Ability to carry out the 2025 shark research fishery objectives of the Agency.

NMFS will give preference to those applicants who are willing and available to fish year-round and who affirmatively state that they intend to do so, to ensure the timely and accurate data collection NMFS needs to meet this year's shark research fishery objectives. NMFS will not consider an applicant who has been charged criminally or civilly (*e.g.*, issued a Notice of Violation and Assessment (NOVA) or Notice of Permit Sanction) for any HMS-related violation for participation in the shark research fishery. In addition, NMFS will not consider applicants who were selected to carry an observer in the previous 2 years for any HMS fishery but failed to contact NMFS to arrange the placement of an observer or failed to comply with any other observer regulations per § 635.7. NMFS will make exceptions for vessels that were selected for HMS observer coverage but did not fish in the quarter when selected and thus did not require an observer. NMFS will not consider applicants who do not possess a valid U.S. Coast Guard safety inspection decal when they submit their application. Applicants who have been non-compliant with any of the HMS observer program regulations in the previous 2 years, as described above, may be eligible for future participation in the shark research fishery by demonstrating 2 subsequent years of compliance with observer regulations at § 635.7.

Selection Process

The HMS Management Division will review all applications received by the deadline (see **DATES**) and develop a list of qualified applicants (*i.e.*, the application is complete and the applicant meets the selection criteria listed above) for participation in the 2025 shark research fishery. The HMS Management Division will provide the list of qualified applicants, without identifying information, to the SEFSC.

The SEFSC will then evaluate the list of applicants and, based on the temporal and spatial needs of the objectives, the availability of observers, the availability of applicants, and the available quota for a given year, will select applicants to conduct the prescribed research as part of the shark research fishery. If NMFS determines that a public meeting is necessary, NMFS will announce details of a public selection meeting in a subsequent **Federal Register** notice.

Once the selection process is complete, NMFS will notify the selected applicants and issue the shark research fishery permits. The shark research fishery permits will be valid through December 31, 2025, unless otherwise specified. If needed, NMFS will arrange a captain's meeting with the shark research fishery participants to discuss the objectives and protocols. In the past, NMFS has often held mandatory captain's meetings before placing observers on vessels, particularly if there are participants who have not participated in recent years or if there are changes in the permit terms and conditions from previous years; NMFS may hold one for the 2025 shark research fishery in early 2025. Once the fishery starts, shark research fishery participants must contact NMFS or the NMFS-designee to arrange the placement of a NMFS-approved observer for each shark research trip, and in the beginning, if needed, to arrange the installation of the specific EM sensor on the vessel. Selected applicants must allow observers the opportunity to perform their duties and assist observers as necessary. At the end of the shark fishery, if applicable, shark research fishery participants must contact NMFS or a NMFS-designee to have the EM sensors removed from the vessel.

A shark research fishery permit will only be valid for the vessel, owner(s), and terms and conditions listed on the permit, and, thus, cannot be transferred to another vessel or owner(s). Shark research fishery participants must carry a NMFS-approved observer on shark research fishery trips. However, issuance of a shark research fishery permit does not guarantee that the permit holder will be assigned a NMFS-approved observer on any particular trip. Rather, issuance indicates that a vessel may be issued a NMFS-approved observer for a particular trip, and on such trips, may be allowed to harvest Atlantic sharks, including sandbar sharks, in excess of the retention limits described in § 635.24(a). Applicable retention limits will be based on available quota, number of vessels participating in the 2025 shark research

fishery, NMFS' shark research fishery objectives, the extent of other restrictions placed on the vessel, and may vary by vessel and/or location. When not operating under the auspices of the shark research fishery, the vessel would still be able to land other shark species subject to existing retention limits on trips without a NMFS-approved observer. Additionally, during those times, the vessel would not need to operate the EM sensors.

NMFS annually invites commercial shark limited access permit holders (Directed and Incidental) to submit an application to participate in the shark research fishery (see **ADDRESSES**). Final decisions on the issuance of a shark research fishery permit will depend on the submission of all required information by the deadline (see **DATES**), and NMFS' review of applicant information as outlined above. The 2025 shark research fishery will start after the commercial shark fishery opens on January 1, 2025 under base quotas and default retention limits, unless otherwise published in the **Federal Register**.

Dated: November 5, 2024.

Karen H. Abrams,

Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XE050]

Conservation Plan for the Eastern Pacific Stock of Northern Fur Seal (Laaquda)

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of availability.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), NMFS has finalized the Conservation Plan for the Eastern Pacific Stock of Northern Fur Seal (Laaquda) based on public comments received. The goal of the Conservation Plan is to conserve and restore the stock to its optimum sustainable population. The Final Conservation Plan (Plan) for this stock is now available.

ADDRESSES: Electronic copies of the Plan are available at the NMFS Alaska Region website: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/>

northern-fur-seal#conservation-management.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Michael Williams, NMFS Alaska Region, 907-271-5117, michael.williams@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The Eastern Pacific (formerly Pribilof) stock of northern fur seals was designated as depleted under the MMPA on June 17, 1988, because the population had declined by over 50 percent from the highest population levels estimated in the 1950s (53 FR 17888, May 18, 1988). Consistent with the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1383b(b)), NMFS developed a Conservation Plan to conserve and restore the stock to its optimum sustainable population, which is defined as a population size within a range of population sizes from the largest supportable within the ecosystem (*i.e.*, carrying capacity) to a level that results in maximum net productivity (50 CFR 216.3). NMFS first published a Conservation Plan in 1993, followed by a revised version in 2007. In 2023, NMFS published a revised draft Conservation Plan and invited public comment (88 FR 38010, June 12, 2023).

The 2024 revised Conservation Plan includes updated knowledge of threats, trends, and ecology of the Eastern Pacific stock of northern fur seals. Specifically, it summarizes advances in our understanding of pup production, pup mortality, pup mass, diet estimation, diving characterization, and use of Bering Sea marine foraging areas and foraging trip duration by the five rookery complexes on the Pribilof Islands. The Plan discusses critical information gaps, conservation actions and initiatives completed since the 2007 Conservation Plan as well as those that are ongoing or should be prioritized in future, and research and management actions intended to promote the conservation and restoration of the stock. The shared resources and cooperative involvement of Federal, State, and Tribal governments, Alaska Native people and Alaska Native Organizations, industry, academia, and non-governmental organizations will be needed throughout the period necessary to restore the stock.

Overall, the stock has continued to decline about 2 percent per year since the depleted designation, and differences exist in trends in abundance and habitat use for St. Paul, St. George, and Bogoslof islands and their associated rookery complexes. Preliminary estimates of age class survival rates since 2010 are similar for

both St. Paul and St. George islands; however, since trends in abundance are significantly different (*i.e.*, declining on St. Paul and increasing on St. George) our assumptions regarding site fidelity, emigration, and detection appear biased, and we are investigating whether rates of emigration are higher than previously assumed. Improved estimates of fur seal consumption of commercially important prey like pollock, and age-specific growth and bioenergetics of northern fur seals have increased the ability of ecosystem models to improve our understanding of fur seal population dynamics and how changes in prey abundance and distribution may be affecting population trends. Based on these recent model results, it is estimated that the northern fur seal population is one of the top four natural predators of pollock biomass and consumes both 0–2 year old and 3+ year old pollock. The new information presented regarding the separation of marine foraging habitat in the Bering Sea by fur seals and the differential consumption of pollock, squid, and other species based on this separation suggests there are opportunities to further investigate the indirect effects of fisheries on northern fur seals from the five rookery complexes identified on the Pribilof Islands. The extent of competition with the pollock fisheries is uncertain due to the spatial segregation of foraging fur seals among the five rookery complexes and in-season changes in the distribution of various segments of the commercial pollock fleet. NMFS intends to work with other interested parties to evaluate existing northern fur seal foraging and life history data as well as existing information on fisheries to assess observed variation in population trends among foraging complexes and guide decisions about new research related to the indirect effects of fishing. New ecosystem models are being developed to advance ecosystem-based fisheries management and are expected to include consumption of important commercial fish species by northern fur seals.

Another notable revision to this Plan is the reflection of recent subsistence use regulation changes and the evolution of co-management relationships between NMFS and Tribes in the Pribilofs. The Plan revision includes valuable input and contributions from the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, and recognizes Unanga contributions to management and research. As fur seal subsistence use is paramount to Pribilofian Unanga cultural identity,

Unangam tunuu (*i.e.*, Aleut language) words have been incorporated into the Plan.

The Notice of Availability of the draft revised Plan was published on June 12, 2023, and the public comment period closed on August 11, 2023 (88 FR 38010). Six public comment letters containing 28 unique substantive comments were received during the comment period, on the topics of direct fishery effects, indirect fishery effects, ecology and life history, Indigenous Knowledge, co-management, optimum sustainable population, disturbance, funding, threats, and effectiveness of the Conservation Plan. In response to these comments, the final version of the Plan contains many clarifications, and significant revisions were made to the indirect fishery effects and optimum sustainable population sections. Also in response to these comments, additional information has been incorporated regarding migration patterns, pup mortality, vital rates, pup health, and foraging trip duration. Finally, a new appendix containing migration and performance measure analyses has been added. A summary of substantive comments and responses to those comments, including whether and how the draft Conservation Plan was revised in response, has been created and is on file with the NMFS Alaska Region, Protected Resources Division.

Kimberly Damon-Randall,

Director, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XE454]

Marine Mammals; File No. 27552

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice; receipt of application.

SUMMARY: Notice is hereby given that NMFS' Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, 1845 Wasp Boulevard, Building 176, Honolulu, HI 96818 (Responsible Party: Charles Littnan, Ph.D.), has applied in due form for a permit to conduct research and enhancement activities on Hawaiian monk seals (*Neomonachus schauinslandi*).

DATES: Written comments must be received on or before December 9, 2024.