



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
Alaska Fisheries Science Center
7600 Sand Point Way NE
Seattle, Washington 98115

MAR 26 2010

TO: Northern Bering Sea Research Area Research Plan Community and Subsistence Workshop Participants:

I am writing to thank you for your recent participation in the Northern Bering Sea Research Area Research Plan Community and Subsistence Workshop held in Anchorage, AK on February 24-25, 2010. During the discussions that took place at the workshop, representatives of the native communities in the northern Bering Sea region expressed their concern over this year's plans to extend the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Alaska Fisheries Science Center's (AFSC) annual eastern Bering Sea shelf bottom trawl survey to the northern Bering Sea as illustrated in Figure 1. I would like to provide you additional information on the objectives and plans for the survey extension and to respond to your concerns about the impact of the survey trawling and potential bycatch of salmon by our survey trawl so you can better understand the benefits of this research and the levels of removals involved.

The effects of climate change and the potential resulting loss of seasonal sea ice in the Bering Sea on the Bering Sea ecosystem are of concern to NMFS and the AFSC. In support of our needs to monitor changes in the Bering Sea, the United States Congress appropriated funds for us to extend our 2010 annual eastern Bering Sea shelf bottom trawl survey northward in conjunction with research on ice dependent marine mammals. The goal of this research is to understand the impacts of the loss of seasonal ice on the groundfish, shellfish, and ice dependent marine mammals. The northward extension of the annual trawl survey will allow us to update baseline data collected during previous NMFS trawl surveys in this region so that future changes in the northern Bering Sea and Bering Sea ecosystems, due to changes in climate and loss of seasonal sea ice, can be measured and studied. This updated baseline information will also help in monitoring and forecasting the impacts of potential activities such as increased shipping and oil and gas exploration on the Bering Sea ecosystem. The primary purpose of the 2010 survey is to study the effects of the loss of seasonal ice; however, information from analysis of data from the survey will also be helpful in the development of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council's Northern Bering Sea Research Plan.

Bottom trawl surveys of the northern Bering Sea region have been conducted by NMFS and ADF&G in previous years so the work we are planning for 2010 should be



considered as a continuation of previous research rather than a new survey activity. This northern area, including Norton Sound, was first surveyed by the NMFS AFSC in 1976 and was repeated once every three years through 1991, generally as an extension to the annual Bering Sea shelf survey. This AFSC triennial survey was discontinued after 1991 due to reduced funding for surveys. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) resumed the triennial bottom trawl survey of the Norton Sound portion of the northern Bering Sea survey in 1996 and this effort is ongoing.

The research trawls currently being used by the AFSC and ADF&G for these surveys are very similar and are essentially the same research trawl in size and design that was used in the earlier AFSC surveys described above. The same trawl also has been used by the Norton Sound Economic Development Corporation (NSEDC) for studies they have conducted in limited areas outside of Norton Sound. We estimate that the total seafloor area that will be trawled by our research trawl (known as an 83-112 Eastern otter trawl) during the 2010 northern Bering Sea survey will be approximately 1.75 square nautical miles (6.0 square kilometers) out of the total northern Bering Sea survey area of 68,807 square nautical miles (236,000 square kilometers). The area of seafloor impacted represents no more than three one-thousandths of one percent (0.003%) of the total northern Bering Sea survey area (Fig. 1). As a result, we believe the impact on the seafloor and to Alaska Native subsistence fisheries will be negligible.

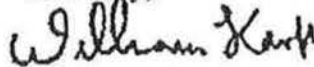
The northern Bering Sea survey will take place in late July to early-August and will be conducted by three ships that are under contract and the full control and direction of AFSC scientists. The survey will be conducted using standard survey protocols and data collected will include weights and counts of all animals taken by species and the collection of individual lengths, weights, and other biological measurements and samples from selected species taken in each trawl haul.

We understand that the potential bycatch of salmon by our research trawl is of concern to Alaska Native communities. However, in the past 35 years, we have caught an average of only seven salmon per year from our entire Bering Sea survey, including the historical AFSC triennial surveys in the northern Bering Sea. According to the ADF&G Fisheries Biologist in charge of the Norton Sound triennial bottom trawl survey, salmon bycatch was zero during the last three surveys in 2002, 2006, and 2008. Since the small research trawls, methods, and time period for our survey are similar to those used by the ADF&G survey, it is unlikely that bycatch of salmon will be a concern during our 2010 survey.

We are inviting Alaska Native communities to participate as part of our scientific field staff in the 2010 northern Bering Sea survey. We can accommodate one or two biologists representing the communities during the northern Bering Sea portion of this year's survey. The AFSC is offering to provide travel expenses for these participants. We would also like to propose holding an open house in Nome during the survey for one day on one of our survey ships to provide an education and outreach opportunity to the Alaska Native community and public and to provide information about the survey and research in the northern Bering Sea. You can contact Mr. Russ Nelson who is the

Director of the AFSC's Resource Assessment and Conservation Engineering Division at Russ.Nelson@noaa.gov or (206) 526-4170 if you would like additional information regarding our survey plans for this summer and if you wish to accept our invitation for participation in the survey and would like to pursue our suggestion of holding an open house on one of the survey ships in Nome. Mr. Nelson will also be the contact for information on the results of this year's survey which will be available late this year or early in 2011.

Sincerely,



William A. Karp
Deputy Science and Research Director
Alaska Region

Attachment

cc: F/AKR: J. Kurland
F/AKC1: R. Nelson
F/AKC2: P. Livingston

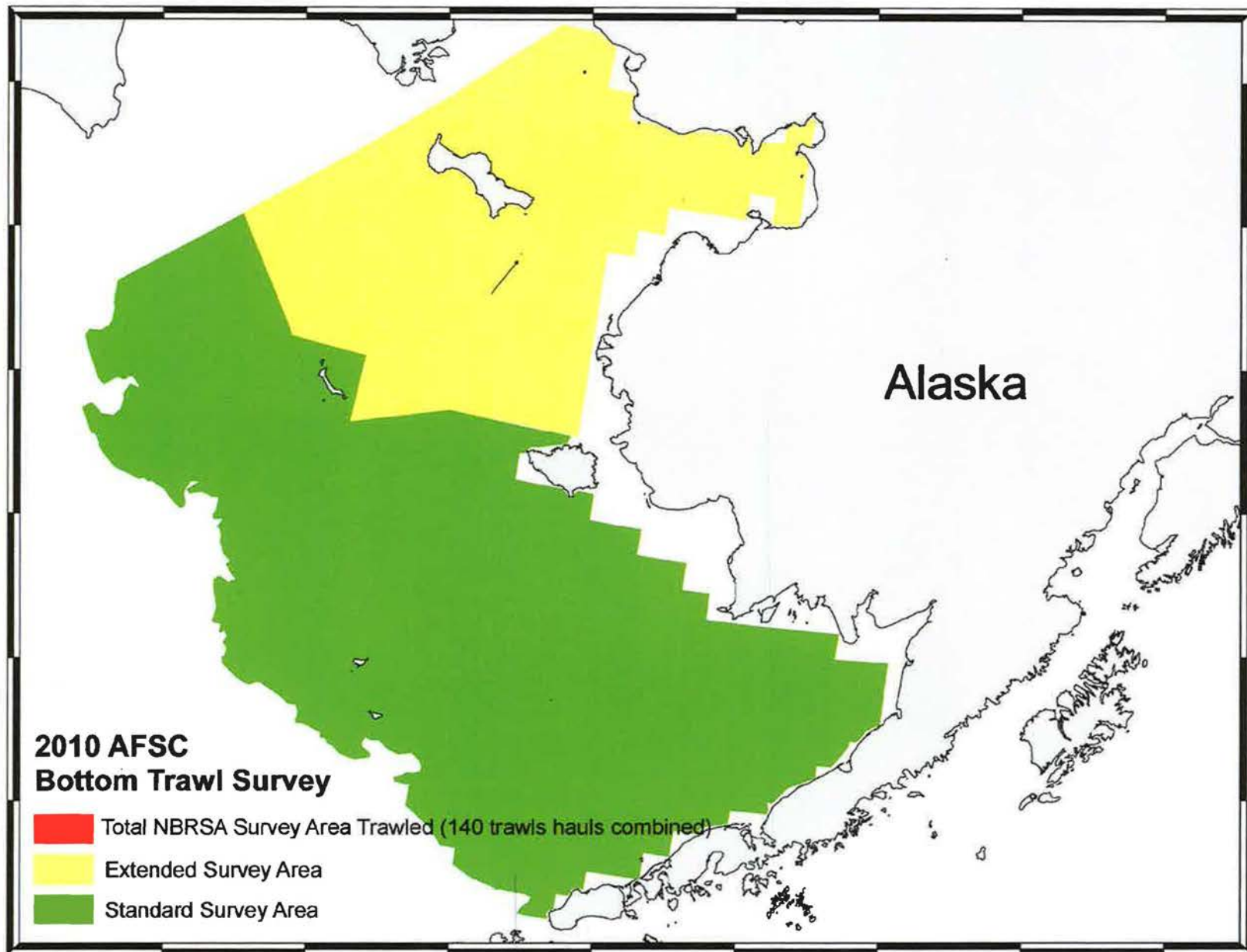


Figure 1.--Map showing the standard (green) and extended (yellow) AFSC bottom trawl survey areas. The arrow located south of St. Lawrence Island points to a tiny red square that represents, to the proper scale, the total survey area to be trawled by the AFSC in the NBSRA for all 140 trawl hauls combined.