UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
PROGRAM PLANNING AND INTEGRATION
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

MAY 10 2013

Dear Reviewer:

In accordance with provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), we enclose for your review the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) *Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Steller Sea Lion Protection Measures for Groundfish Fisheries in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Management Area* (or the Executive Summary thereof). This proposed action would revise Steller sea lion protection measures for the Aleutian Islands Atka mackerel, Pacific cod, and pollock fisheries to minimize the potential fishery impacts on the western distinct population segment (WDPS) of Steller sea lions while reducing economic impacts on the fisheries, to the extent practicable.

This DEIS is prepared pursuant to NEPA to assess the environmental impacts associated with NOAA proceeding with revised Steller sea lion protection measures for the Aleutian Islands Atka mackerel, Pacific cod, and pollock fisheries. The WDPS of Steller sea lions is listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and has critical habitat designated to protect haulout, rookery, and foraging locations throughout Alaska waters. NOAA has determined that the groundfish fisheries may affect foraging resources for Steller sea lions by competing for the same prey species (Atka mackerel, Pacific cod, and pollock). The ESA requires NOAA to insure that the groundfish fisheries are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the WDPS of Steller sea lions or adversely modify or destroy its designated critical habitat. The protection measures currently in place insure that jeopardy is not likely, but they may be more protective then necessary to avoid the likelihood of jeopardy, resulting in more economic costs to the fishing industry than necessary to comply with the ESA. The DEIS assesses the environmental, social, and economic effects associated with alternative Steller sea lion protection measures.

Copies of the DEIS may be obtained from the Responsible Program Official identified below. The document also is accessible electronically through the NMFS Alaska Region website at www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/sustainablefisheries/sslpm/eis/ or at www.regulations.gov after entering docket number "NOAA-NMFS-2012-0013" in the search bar.

Written comments on the DEIS should be submitted by mail or facsimile (fax) to the Responsible Program Official identified below. When submitting mail or fax comments, include the following identifier for the comment subject: Steller sea lion EIS.

Responsible Program Official: James W. Balsiger, Ph.D.
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National Marine Fisheries Service
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
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Written comments may also be submitted electronically to the www.regulations.gov portal. Written comments submitted during the agency's 60-day public comment period must be received by July 16, 2013.

Sincerely,

Patricia A. Montanio
NOAA NEPA Coordinator

Enclosure

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