

Report of the National Marine Fisheries Service's

National Seabird Workshop

**Building a National Plan to Improve the State of Knowledge and
Reduce Commercial Fisheries Impacts on Seabirds**

September 9–11, 2009, Alaska Fisheries Science Center, Seattle, WA

Kim S. Rivera, Lisa T. Ballance, Lee Benaka, Eric R. Breuer, Samantha
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U.S. Department of Commerce
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service

NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-F/SPO-139
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Penny S. Pritzker, Secretary

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Kathryn D. Sullivan, Acting Administrator

National Marine Fisheries Service
Eileen Sobeck, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries

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Copies of this report may be obtained from:

National Marine Fisheries Service
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Seabird Program
P.O. Box 21668
Juneau, AK 99802

Or online at:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seabirds/national.htm>

Executive Summary

A. Context for Workshop

Seabirds are of interest to and are studied by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Although the primary trust responsibility for seabird management and conservation rests with the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has a responsibility through various statutory authorities and agency actions to monitor, understand, and mitigate the effects of seabird bycatch, as well as to manage the coastal and marine habitats that seabirds depend on for various life stages within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

In 2001 the United States finalized its National Plan of Action for Reducing the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (NPOA-Seabirds) resulting in the establishment of NMFS' National Seabird Program (NSP). The primary focus of the NPOA-Seabirds and of the NSP is to mitigate the direct takes of seabirds by fisheries (e.g., incidental catch or bycatch, gear entanglement). The NPOA-Seabirds addresses both domestic and international fishery issues. Thus, NMFS' interests and concerns with seabirds focus on the long-term effects of seabird bycatch in NMFS-managed fisheries and in fisheries conducted in many areas of the world's oceans.

A second priority for the NSP is to understand seabirds exclusive of bycatch issues. Seabirds are valuable and long-recognized ecosystem indicators. Their distribution and abundance can reflect physical and biological oceanography,

abundance and distribution of mid trophic-level organisms, and the effects of climate change on apex predators. Contaminant levels in seabirds can provide insight into the health of a particular ecosystem. And, unlike so many marine organisms, seabirds are relatively easy to sample. Because ecosystem state directly affects the resources for which NMFS has management responsibility, ecosystem integrators and indicators such as seabirds provide great potential to advance the science of ecosystem management for NMFS.

The NSP is led by a National Coordinator and implemented regionally through seabird contacts at each Regional Office, Science Center, and Headquarters office. The program has received a small allotment of funds since FY 2004 and has allocated these funds through modest budgets to NMFS regions and centers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to conduct projects consistent with the objectives of the NPOA-Seabirds. New mandates, such as those under the 2007 reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), have increased the requirements on the NSP over and above present funding levels, creating a shortfall in funds. Although the NSP is aware of and monitors agency activities related to seabird research and conservation, no formal mechanism is in place to fund priority projects in a cohesive and comprehensive manner. The NSP recognized that the development of a National Seabird Strategic Plan could help identify NMFS priorities and target funding toward key seabird projects, and to generally elevate awareness regarding the value of seabirds and seabird research to agency leadership.

In January 2009, the NSP National Coordinator convened a steering committee for the purpose of planning and hosting a National Seabird Workshop. This workshop was the first comprehensive planning exercise for the NSP. The steering committee was supported by Philip Heller with Learning Design Associates, an organizational consulting firm with experience facilitating strategic planning meetings within NOAA.

B. Workshop Goals and Process

The primary goal of this workshop was to initiate the development of a National Seabird Implementation Plan that can be used to:

- Describe NMFS seabird activities and important partnerships with other management agencies;
- Guide NMFS seabird management and science; and
- Provide seabird-related input to NOAA’s strategic planning and budgeting process.

The workshop took place September 9–11, 2009, at NMFS’ Alaska Fisheries Science Center in Seattle, Washington. Representatives were requested to attend from each of the NMFS regional offices, science centers, and headquarters offices. Experts were invited from NOAA International Affairs, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Washington, Washington Sea Grant, and the North Pacific Fishery Management Council. Thirty-eight people attended.

NMFS participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in advance of the workshop in an attempt to understand the current activity, resources (both current and needed), and partnerships associated with seabirds.

Questionnaire responses are summarized in Section II of this report.

The first day of the workshop was a plenary session; workshop themes were introduced with presentations from and Q&A discussions with invited speakers.

Four themes formed the focus for breakout groups on days 2 and 3 of the workshop:

- Pelagic seabird abundance and distribution and overlap with fisheries;
- Anthropogenic impacts (e.g. bycatch/entanglement/habitat alteration) and mitigation;
- Management and coordination within and between agencies and with stakeholders on shared objectives; and
- Ecosystem approach to management—seabirds as indicators of marine health (i.e. sentinel species).

The thematic breakout groups considered what an ideal (i.e., “minimum yet meaningful”) regional strategy might be to address issues associated with their respective topic and then worked to consider a national strategy.

C. Results and Next Steps

Several themes emerged from the workshop, which were considered necessary areas of focus, particularly in the near term (within five years):

Continue working on seabird bycatch issues. Participants agreed on the necessity to conduct regular seabird bycatch assessments of fisheries documented to incidentally take seabirds, develop and/or prescribe measures to reduce this bycatch where it is a conservation problem, and

expand these bycatch assessment and reduction efforts to other fisheries as appropriate. Participants also noted the success of a collaboration with Washington Sea Grant for addressing Alaska fishery seabird bycatch issues and suggested that a similar approach could be successful with other fisheries.

Improving connections, networks, and educational outreach. Workshop participants suggested more symposia at conferences (e.g., Pacific Seabird Group, American Fisheries Society, Society for Conservation Biology, World Seabird Conference, International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), North Pacific Marine Science Organization (PICES)); more formal ties with the USFWS for sharing responsibilities and interagency coordination (using marine turtles as a model); and more joint efforts, plans, and assessments among NMFS centers and offices and with external agencies (e.g. other NOAA line offices, Department of Defense (DOD), U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)) and among regional inter-stakeholder networks. Development of a communications plan was recognized as critical to educate decision makers, citizens, and NGOs.

Creating a multi-agency/entity inventory of spatial/temporal coverage of existing data and data collection methods. Participants agreed that creation and maintenance of a seabird metadatabase was important. Such a database would include information on geographic region, species, years, and seasons for which seabird data were available and a listing of the general types of data. In addition to providing an inventory of available data, this database would be valuable in identifying data gaps. Creation of this inventory would be consistent with efforts needed to carry out NOAA's Coastal

and Marine Spatial Planning (CMSP) process.

Using seabirds as indicators to improve ecosystem-based approaches to management. Seabirds are well-known indicators of ecosystem state. Seabird data can, therefore, potentially be used to improve ecosystem-based management, for example, by facilitating predictive effects of climate change on directly managed species or contributing to coastal and marine spatial planning. Participants suggested integrated national and international partnerships to advance modeling work (ecosystem, climate change, fish stock assessment, and coastal and marine habitat models) and to further bycatch reduction efforts. Results of these various efforts could be used in predictive climate and ecological models, stock assessments, off-site mitigation efforts, and global marine assessments. Annual national and regional data and progress reports should be available. Participants envisioned incorporation of seabirds into NMFS' annual national and regional strategic plans.

Formalizing the seabird program and adding necessary infrastructure. Participants expressed a strong desire to find an organizational "home" for the program and to give it dedicated regional and national staff with clear position descriptions and performance measures. Participants suggested that roles be clearly defined for the NSP's Points of Contact and they expressed needs for more fisheries observers and staff specialists (e.g., staff seabird ecologists, data base managers).

Augmenting policy approaches. Participants noted that there are several existing statutory, regulatory, and other policy tools that the agency can use to conserve seabirds. They also noted that these tools, in some cases, could be more fully utilized. For

example, section 316 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act calls for a bycatch reduction engineering program that is regionally based. This section of the law is being implemented, but increased activities in this area were encouraged. There are also ongoing efforts to implement Executive Order 13186, including the finalization of a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to enhance cooperation between the two agencies for the conservation of migratory birds. In other cases, additional tools (e.g., new laws or changes to existing laws), are needed. For example, participants noted that more work was needed to continue to support the Agency's position that seabirds be included in the definitions of "bycatch" and of "protected living marine resources" in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Amending each of these definitions accordingly could potentially strengthen the agency's ability to reduce seabird bycatch both domestically and internationally. Regarding efforts to join the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels, participants supported the work with Congress in the adoption of implementing legislation and supported these efforts wholeheartedly.

Many participants wanted to extend what was to be accomplished in the near term (i.e., meeting 100% of legislative, regulatory and policy requirements) to a longer time frame.

Participants suggested three major next steps to begin implementation of these priorities:

1. Create a NOAA report of this workshop as early as possible;
2. Create a National Seabird Strategic Plan; and

3. Create alternatives for the fiscal year cycle of NOAA's strategic planning and budgeting process.

D. After the Workshop

Following the workshop, the NSP and its seabird steering committee reviewed the workshop recommendations and findings and developed the following mission statement and goals for the Program:

National Seabird Program Mission:

- Maintain seabirds as integral components of healthy and resilient ocean ecosystems by conducting research on and mitigating threats to seabirds in the ocean and near-shore environment, and by raising awareness of NMFS seabird-related activities and responsibilities.

National Seabird Program Goals:

- Quantify, reduce, and mitigate impacts on seabirds due to fisheries.
- Incorporate seabird ecology into NMFS Ecosystem Approach to Management by using seabirds as indicators of ecosystem state, and understanding variation in seabird distribution, abundance, and other biological parameters over space and through time.
- Raise awareness of NMFS' seabird research, management, and responsibilities with our partners, constituents, and the general public.
- Develop, implement, and maintain a National Seabird Program strategic plan.

- Support NMFS regional seabird activities through obtaining funding and other resources.
- Facilitate communication among NMFS regional seabird programs to identify issues of common interest and opportunities for collaboration.

Home for the National Seabird Program

Also in response to the workshop recommendations, the National Seabird Program was transferred within NMFS headquarters from the Office of Protected Resources to the Office of Science and Technology (ST). Given that many of the NSP activities in the field occur at Science Centers and address scientific topics under the purview of ST (e.g. observer programs, ecosystem-based science, stock assessment and research surveys), ST is an obvious home for the NSP.

