

Steller sea lion designated 'threatened'

JUNEAU — The National Marine Fisheries Service adopted an emergency regulation recently that designates Steller sea lions as a "threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act.

The action was taken in response to dramatic declines in the number of Steller sea lions counted at major rookeries in Central and Western Alaska between 1960 and 1989, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The emergency regulation prohibits shooting at or near any Steller sea lion in U.S. waters, except for Native subsistence. It also prohibits boats from coming within three miles of certain Steller sea lion rookeries and empowers the secretary of the Depart-

ment of Commerce to place observers on any fishing vessels in order to monitor the accidental capture of sea lions in fishing gear.

In addition, the regulation restricts the number of sea lions which may be accidentally caught and killed during fishing operations west of 141 degrees west longitude to 675 animals.

The National Marine Fisheries Service will immediately initiate work on a plan to guide the long-term recovery of the Steller sea lion population, according to the service.

The service also will continue to investigate the cause of the decline of the sea lion population. Possible causes include shooting, accidental capture during commercial fishing operations, the

influence of commercial fishing on food supply, disease, natural environmental fluctuations or other unknown changes in the ecosystem.

Surveys by the National Marine Fisheries Service have shown that counts of Steller sea lions in Central and Western Alaska have dropped 63 percent since 1985 and 82 percent since 1960. On rookeries from the

Kenai Peninsula to Kiska Island in the western Aleutians, the total number of sea lions counted has declined from a high of 140,000 in 1956-60 to about 25,000 in 1989.

Violations of laws protecting Steller sea lions are subject to severe civil and criminal penalties, including fines of up to \$25,000, imprisonment for up to one year and vessel forfeiture.
