

ADF&G explains marine mammal control

by the Alaska Department
of Fish and Game

Editor's Note: The State of Alaska is considering whether Alaska should apply for management of some marine mammals in the state. These questions and answers were prepared by ADF&G to help people understand the issues.

What is Alaska doing now about marine mammals?

ADF&G is taking the public's comments and concerns about possible state management, working on funding sources and developing ideas, such as cooperative management planning for a state program. All of these factors will be considered when ADF&G recommends to Gov. Steve Cowper in early December whether Alaska should apply for management of polar bears, walruses and sea otters.

Doesn't Alaska already manage marine mammals?

No. In 1972 Congress passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act — known as the MMPA — which made the federal government responsible for management of all marine mammals. Management authority was withdrawn from coastal states, even though some such as Alaska had effective research and management programs.

Why not leave things the way they are?

The act was intended to protect marine mammals, but doesn't allow for comprehensive management. Right now, there are no scientific conservation and management plans for marine mammals. Regardless of who manages, there should be management plans for healthy populations, not just depleted ones, so that conservation problems can be prevented.

Why are you only considering walruses, polar bears and sea otters?

Before 1972 when the MMPA was passed, Alaska managed 10 species of marine mammals — polar bears, walruses, sea otters, sea lions, beluga whales and five species of seals.

In the last 15 years there have been changes in the status of some populations and in the state's financial situation. Because of these changes ADF&G re-evaluated all 10 species.

We concluded that the state should

seriously consider management of polar bears, walruses and sea otters. For the other species, we either don't have enough information to determine the population status, the populations are declining and the MMPA wouldn't allow the state to manage or there are not major conservation issues at this time.

How would state management be different?

Sea otters, walruses and polar bears would be managed through the Board of Game. The state would implement conservation and management programs that would conserve the resource, allow public use and manage to make sure that populations did not become depleted. Alaskans would have greater input into the decision-making process. The concerns of Alaskans could be better balanced with national and international concerns.

Would the federal government still be involved?

Yes. Alaska would cooperate with the federal government on research. The MMPA would still protect marine mammals and provide guidelines, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would have oversight of state marine mammal programs.

State revenues have declined. How can the state afford it?

The MMPA states that the federal government can fund up to 50 percent of the costs of a state management program and 100 percent of state-conducted research. The state could manage sea otters, polar bears and walruses only if adequate federal funds were made available. The state would have to fund 50 percent of the management program costs. Part of the reason the state is considering only three species is so management costs stay affordable.

How would state management affect subsistence?

Both Alaska law and the MMPA require that subsistence would be the priority consumptive use of the species. If non-subsistence uses occurred, they could not have a negative effect on subsistence uses and they would have to provide economic opportunities to subsistence users to the maximum extent practical.

Could Non-Natives hunt?

The Board of Game would make regulations to protect the species, allow for public use and make decisions about who could use the resource. Under Alaska law, decisions about who could or could not hunt would not be based on racial considerations. If populations were healthy and subsistence needs were

satisfied, then non-subsistence hunting could be allowed.

Why hasn't the state received management authority before now?

Until the MMPA was amended in 1981, it did not allow the states enough flexibility in making regulations and setting harvest limits. The management of walruses was returned to Alaska in 1976 as a test case. Alaska gave management back in 1979 because federal regulations did not allow the flexibility to have biologically sound management programs. After the MMPA was amended in 1981 to resolve earlier problems, the state reconsidered the issue.

What about the public meetings on marine mammal management a few years ago? What has changed since then?

In 1984-85, ADF&G held meetings in over 40 communities to hear what Alaskans thought about state management of 10 species of marine mammals. There was no clear agreement on whether Alaska should apply for management.

What should I do?

You can contact Lloyd Lowry or Kathy Frost at ADF&G, 1300 College Road, Fairbanks 99701; 456-5156 with questions or concerns.