



U.S. ARCTIC PROGRAM OCEANS NORTH

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PRECAUTIONARY MANAGEMENT FOR ARCTIC FISHERIES

The Arctic Ocean faces changes unparalleled on the planet. Over the last 100 years, the Arctic has warmed twice as fast as the rest of the Earth. Since the 1950s, an area of sea ice almost half the size of the continental United States has melted. Many species that rely on this ice-based ecosystem, such as polar bears, walrus, spectacled eiders, bowhead whales and ribbon seals face significant environmental stress; some are already listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

There are no commercial fisheries north of the Bering Strait at present because, historically, sea ice has blocked access. At the current rate of melting, however, commercial fisheries in the Arctic Ocean could soon become a reality. If allowed, this may harm vital habitats for marine mammals, fish and birds, and directly compete with Arctic native communities that depend on the oceans and these species for survival.

The waters off Alaska's coast provide more than half of the nation's seafood, and they are arguably the best managed fisheries in the country. Credit for this goes to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils established by the Magnuson Act of 1976 to oversee the nation's fisheries. The council advises the federal government on fisheries policy in U.S. waters off Alaska. Consisting of fishermen, scientists and government officials, this regional council

has done more to control bycatch and protect habitat from fishing gear than any other in the nation. Though the management record of the North Pacific council is laudable, there are many difficult issues yet to be resolved to keep Alaska's fisheries sustainable.

The North Pacific council recently voted unanimously to close federal waters in the U.S. Arctic to commercial fishing. The plan would close waters north of the Bering Strait to commercial fishing, until or unless science shows that such activities will not harm the fragile ecosystem or the local people who subsist on the bounty of the Arctic. The next vital step is for the Secretary of Commerce to make a final decision on implementing the new plan. If approved by the Secretary, the Arctic Fishery Management Plan will also establish an important precedent for other nations whose territorial waters encompass parts of the vast Arctic Ocean.

In keeping with the precautionary approach of the North Pacific council to preserve habitat and regulate fish stocks, the proposed Arctic Fishery Management Plan would be the first major recommendation by any federal entity for a precautionary approach to resource use in order to protect a fragile ecosystem in its entirety. In other regions of the country and the world, such a measure has generally occurred only after fishing has begun. Closing the Arctic prior to commercial fishing represents a proactive management step that should set the standard

for other types of industrial development in the Arctic Ocean such as commercial shipping and oil and gas leases.

The Alaska fishing industry, fishery managers and Arctic community leaders and conservation groups support the proposed Arctic FMP to protect this sensitive ecosystem, which is already pressured by climate change, and to ensure that commercial fishing does not add further stress to the region and its wildlife. Fishing should only be permitted if scientific study determines that it will not harm the ecosystem.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is accepting public comment until July 27th on whether to approve the measure.

We now have an opportunity to minimize damage to the Arctic before it is too late, but time is short. We should act while we have the chance.

[Submit your public comment here.](#)



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