

# **Aleutian Islands National Marine Sanctuary**

## **Fact Sheet**

### **December 2014**

Although more than half of Alaska's lands receive permanent federal protection, virtually none of Alaska's federal waters receive comparable protective status. This proposal would create Alaska's first National Marine Sanctuary.

The Aleutians marine ecosystem is one of the most biologically important in the world, but faces the prospect of ecological collapse without near-term conservation intervention.

**Size:** This sanctuary designation would cover an offshore area of approximately 554,000 square nautical miles (nm<sup>2</sup>), an area larger than the recently expanded Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument (370,000 nm<sup>2</sup>). Thus, the proposed Aleutian Islands National Marine Sanctuary would be the largest marine protected area in the U.S., and one of the world's largest.

It would contain all federal waters along the entire Aleutian Islands archipelago (from 3 to 200 nautical miles north and south of the islands) to the Alaska mainland, including federal waters off the Pribilof Islands and Bristol Bay.

**Rationale:** The Aleutian Islands marine ecosystem is one of the most biologically productive in the world ocean, supporting the largest populations of marine mammals, seabirds, fish and shellfish in the nation and one of the largest anywhere in the world. The Aleutian region –

- Hosts the largest fishing port in the U.S., harvesting a billion pounds of fish worth over \$2 billion dollars annually.
- Is one of the most important seabird habitats in the world, supporting tens of millions of seabirds each summer, while serving as a significant staging area for huge populations of many species of migratory waterfowl.
- Represents one of the most important marine mammal habitats in the world, supporting over 20 species of marine mammals, many of which are listed under the Endangered Species Act. Some of the region's marine mammal populations are in significant decline.
- Harbors the highest diversity and abundance of cold-water corals in the world, in addition to sponge habitat and rare hydrothermal vent ecosystems.
- Serves a critical role in ecological connectivity. For example, Unimak Pass is one of the most important migratory wildlife corridors in the world ocean. Much of the migration of whales, seals, seabirds, and fish pass seasonally through this Aleutian gateway between the North Pacific and Bering Sea.

**Threats:** No place in the American marine environment is more at risk than this area nominated for national sanctuary protection. Aleutian waters are at risk from three main threats:

overfishing, oil and gas development and increased shipping, with insufficient protection. These threats are, in turn, aggravated by the growing effects of climate change:

- Most of Alaska's threatened and endangered species are marine animals, many in the Aleutians, and are in decline as a result of excessive harvests of commercial fish and ocean environmental change;
- Despite an increase in trans-Pacific shipping, to date there is inadequate protection from ship groundings, collisions, and oil spills. The passes in these waters have limited vessel tracking, no established traffic lanes, no vessel traffic system, no speed limits, no mandatory pilotage, no weather and/or ice transit restrictions, inadequate or no tug rescue capability, and limited spill response capability;
- In addition to the immediate risk of oil and other hazardous cargo spills, there are risks from ship strikes on marine mammals, underwater noise from ships, and introduction of invasive species –the last of which could do more damage than oil spills;
- The Arctic has seen a much faster than anticipated decline of sea ice, and with increases in trans-Pacific shipping, ship traffic through the Aleutians will continue to increase. This, in turn, will produce more underwater noise that can rise to levels which dominate the acoustic properties of shallow seas; and
- Climate change is causing unprecedented marine ecosystem impacts, including ocean acidification and coastal erosion. Changes in the ocean are affecting marine migrations which exacerbate the effects of excess fish harvests while warming temperatures enable more oil and gas activity and even further increases in ship traffic.

**Need:** Alaska's approximately 218 Marine Protected Areas – including various fishery-management closures, sea lion rookery buffers, research reserves, state marine parks, critical habitat areas and game sanctuaries – offer few meaningful, permanent safeguards against these rising threats. These MPAs provide minimal protections, are mostly limited to inshore waters and are often temporary. A National Marine Sanctuary would provide integrated, permanent and effective measures to reduce further ecological deterioration in this vital resource.

**Sanctuary Effects:** Designation of the Aleutian Islands National Marine Sanctuary would

1. Make permanent all existing species and habitat protections in the region;
2. Expand trawl closures west of 170 W, prohibiting all bottom trawl gear, and pelagic trawls to 20 nm offshore;
3. Authorize additional protective measures that may assist in ecological recovery;
4. Make permanent the prohibition on offshore oil drilling; and
5. Strengthen safeguards on transit shipping which pose an immediate oil spill risk.

At the same time, sanctuary designation would

1. Protect and enhance Alaska Native marine subsistence and coastal small-boat fisheries;
2. Allow rebuilding of seabird, marine mammal, and fish habitat, and populations;
3. Protect unique seabed habitats and cold water corals; and
4. Enhance scientific understanding of the region.

###