



# NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND  
ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE



## NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE, ALASKA REGION

# Ice Seals: Frequently Asked Questions

### 1) What are ice seals and why are they called that?

- In Alaska, “ice seals” is a general term often used to refer to ringed, bearded, ribbon, and spotted seals.
- These species are called ice seals because they have their pups on the sea ice, and they rely on sea ice for nursing, rearing, molting, feeding, and resting during some part of each year.
- Each ice seal species is uniquely adapted to use specific types of sea ice in different ways.



### 2) Who is the National Marine Fisheries Service?

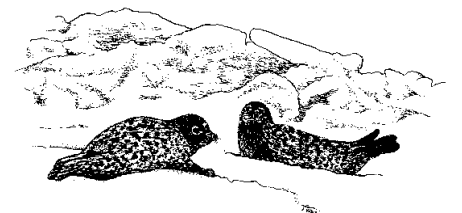
- The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is the federal government agency responsible for research, management, and conservation of whales, dolphins, porpoises, seals, and sea lions.
- Our Alaska regional offices are located in Juneau and Anchorage, AK, and our marine mammal laboratory is in Seattle, WA.

### 3) Who is the Ice Seal Committee and how do they co-manage ice seals?

The Ice Seal Committee (ISC) is an Alaska Native organization dedicated to conserving ice seal populations, habitat, and hunting, and to preserving Native cultures and traditions. The ISC co-manages ice seals with NMFS by monitoring subsistence harvest and cooperating on needed research and education programs pertaining to ice seals.

### 4) Are ice seals being listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA)?

- Ringed and Bearded Seals: NMFS proposed to list subspecies of the ringed seal and distinct population segments (DPSs) of the bearded seal, including those that occur in Alaska, as threatened under the ESA. NMFS provided a public comment period on the proposed listing rules at that time. Final listing rules (or withdrawals) normally must be published within one year of publication of proposed rules.
- Spotted Seals: In October 2009, NMFS determined that listing under the ESA was not warranted for the Okhotsk and Bering DPSs of spotted seals, including those in Alaska. NMFS finalized listing of the southern DPS of spotted seals (Yellow Sea and Sea of Japan) as threatened under the ESA in October 2010.
- Ribbon Seals: NMFS determined listing of ribbon seals was not warranted under the ESA in December 2008.

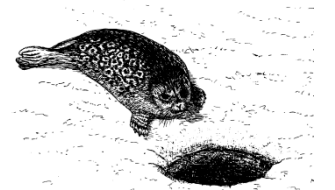


### 5) What are the main reasons why Alaska ringed and bearded seals are proposed for ESA listing?

- NMFS concluded that forecasted loss of sea ice habitat, and for ringed seals especially loss of snow cover, will likely lead to population declines and challenge the persistence of these populations within the foreseeable future.
- The greatest impacts to Arctic ringed seals are expected to result from reductions in on-ice snow cover. Within this century, average snow depths are forecast to become inadequate for the formation and occupation of birth lairs over much of the Arctic ringed seal’s range.
- The greatest impacts to Alaska bearded seals are expected to result from reductions in sea ice suitable for nursing and rearing pups, in particular in the Bering Sea. Within this century, bearded seals would likely have to shift their nursing, rearing, and molting areas to ice-covered seas north of the Bering Strait, where projections suggest the ice edge could retreat to deep waters of the Arctic basin.

### 6) If ringed and bearded seals are listed as threatened under the ESA, will Alaska Natives be able to hunt them for subsistence purposes?

- Yes. The ESA allows for subsistence harvest of listed species by Alaska Natives, so long as it is not done in a wasteful manner.
- Subsistence hunting may be regulated under the ESA, but only if the harvest is expressly found to “materially and negatively” affect the species.
- Currently, the subsistence harvest of ice seals by Alaska Natives appears to be sustainable and does not pose a threat to the populations.



### 7) We have limits on many subsistence resources but not ice seals. Will this change?

- If ice seal populations declined to very low levels over time, limits could be put on the subsistence harvest of them.
- If the current situation changes, NMFS will work under co-management with the ISC to find the best approach to ensure that healthy populations of ice seals and a sustainable subsistence harvest of these seals by Alaska Natives is continued into the future.

### 8) If restrictions were placed on hunting ringed or bearded seals, would other activities that may affect them, such as commercial fishing, be restricted?

- If the proposed listings of ringed and bearded seals under the ESA are finalized, recovery plans will be developed to determine the appropriate course of action needed to restore the species.
- A recovery plan may recommend restrictions on activities which are shown to prevent or slow the recovery of the species. NMFS must consider many activities that may affect a listed species, including fishing, oil and gas activities, and subsistence harvest.

### 9) Who can I contact for more information?

- Barbara Mahoney (biologist) - National Marine Fisheries Service (Anchorage): (907) 271-3448
- Tammy Olson (biologist) – National Marine Fisheries Service (Anchorage): (907) 271-2372
- The NMFS Alaska Region Web Site: <http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/>

