

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Janet Coit
Assistant Administrator, NOAA Fisheries
1335 East-West Hwy
Silver Spring, MD 20910

October 12, 2023

Dear Ms. Coit,

On September 21, 2023, NOAA Fisheries reported that nine killer whales were caught in the Bering Sea and Aleutian Island (BSAI) groundfish trawl fisheries this year, with only one released alive. While some level of interaction with whales and other marine mammals is expected in commercial fishing, the number of dead whales brought up in trawl nets this year is unacceptable and is a pointed reminder that the status quo cannot continue.

I understand that you are conducting an analysis of the whales. As you work to understand more about these tragedies, please consider the following questions:

1. What types of trawlers encountered the whales?
2. Are orcas being observed more frequently near trawl vessels than in the past, and do trawlers interact more with orcas than other fishing vessels?
3. Have orcas moved into new environments or begun exhibiting new behaviors?
4. Are there reports of increased whale-fishing vessel interactions in other nations?
5. What tools do trawlers have to recognize nearby whale activity and mitigate gear interactions and entanglement?
6. Does discarding bycatch via chutes instead of through deck sorting reduce orca predation on the discards? How does discarding through the chutes lead to mitigating whale interactions?
7. When do you anticipate having results that can be shared?
8. What is your plan to mitigate orca interactions in the future?

I encourage you to release your findings as soon as possible so that we can find ways to address the issue. NMFS may also want to consider increased whale-gear interactions in any National Standard revisions, particularly learned whale behavior related to bycatch discards.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. Please keep my office apprised as you investigate and identify what happened in the BSAI trawl fishery that led to so many dead orcas in nets.

Sincerely,



Mary Peltola
Representative for All Alaska