

Judge Rules on Steller Sea Lions

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Stephanie Joyce/KUCB

There won't be an Atka mackerel or Pacific cod fishery in the western Aleutians until at least 2015. U.S. District Court Judge Timothy Burgess ruled today (Monday) that the National Marine Fisheries Service would have 23 months to assess the impact of its Steller sea lion protection measures in the region.

The agency shut down the Atka mackerel and Pacific cod fisheries in 2011 after determining that they were adversely affecting the endangered western stock of Steller sea lions. Fisheries groups and the State of Alaska sued NFMS over the closures.

In a January ruling, Judge Burgess upheld the restrictions, but ordered the agency to prepare an environmental impact statement, noting that their initial assessment had not given the public sufficient opportunities to participate. Today's ruling gives NFMS almost two years to prepare a more comprehensive statement and nine months after that to decide whether any changes to the current rule are warranted.

The plaintiffs had argued for a much shorter timeline that would have potentially allowed for reopening the fisheries in 2014. The closures are estimated to cost the industry more than \$80 million a year. Under today's ruling the earliest potential re-opening is January 2015.