

Weather Service Seeks to Simplify Marine Weather Forecasts

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Changes to marine forecast zones are in red. National Weather Service map

Jay Barrett/KMXT

Marine weather forecasts are required listening for fishermen and others living in Coastal Alaska. They give vital information specifically for mariners, such as expected wave height and, in the winter, icing conditions. Coming this fall, the National Weather Service will be making modifications to the different forecasting zones in the Western Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands and Bristol Bay.

James Nelson, the science and operations officer for the National Weather Service Forecast Office in Anchorage, says the changes are an effort to better communicate to the public.

“The reason we changed this was just to clean up the wording and get rid of the east and west of, north and south of. What we were finding was we were splitting up a lot of our larger zones into these areas. So what we did to better serve our customers and not to have excessive wording per zone, we are breaking up these zone to little smaller areas so we are able to get more detail for those specific areas, so that people can read the forecasts with a lot more ease and not get confused as to what was actually in the forecast, especially across the marine weather radio broadcasts.”

There are two changes around Kodiak. What is now reported as “the Barren Islands and Kamishak Bay Waters,” will be split vertically in the middle and become two zones: “Barren Islands East,” and “West of the Barren Islands including Kamishak Bay.” Shuyak Island will be included in the latter zone, which will change “Shuyak Island to Sitkinak” into “Marmot Island to Sitkinak.”

In the Eastern and Central Aleutians, Nelson said the zones will be split horizontally, with separate forecast zones north and south of the islands.

“The main reason because of that is due to wave height. And with the chain of islands there we have really stark differences between the Bering side and the Pacific side. There was a change as well out near Atka area, but that was mainly just to make it a little bit smaller because we were always splitting up east of Atka or west of Atka type thing.”

Likewise, the Bristol Bay zone will be quite a bit smaller to better accommodate vessels operating in near shore waters.

“We just went specifically with Bristol Bay now. Before the zone itself was out into the Bering Sea and quite out into an area where it wasn’t transited by ship traffic all that often, so we tried to get the 160, which is the Bristol Bay area, we tried to get more centric about it and make sure it was just handling the Bristol Bay area.”

The changes, which include eight new forecast zones and several more name and number changes, go into effect on October 1st.