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Aleut Community of St. Paul Island Receives NOAA Species Recovery Grant to Tribes to Investigate Diet and Contaminants in Steller Sea Lion

The Steller sea lion population in the Pribilof Islands has declined to extremely low levels and the sole remaining breeding rookery at Walrus Island is currently in danger of extinction. Over the last 50 years pup production on Walrus Island has declined by over 90%, from 2,866 in 1960 to only 29 pups born in 2005. Similar to the decline of the western Alaskan population as a whole, the cause of the sea lion decline in the Pribilof Islands in recent decades remains unexplained. The highest ranked threats to the recovery of the western Alaska sea lion population listed in the Steller Sea Lion Recovery Plan are environmental variability, competition with fisheries, killer whale predation and toxic substances.

To help determine the cause of the decline the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island-Tribal Government has received a 3-year Species Recovery Grant to Tribes from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the amount of \$158,085 for the first year of the study. The objectives of this study are to collect biological samples from Steller sea lions in the Pribilof Island in order to characterize the diet of sea lion and to archive tissues for current and future analyses (e.g. contaminant load). Diet information will be assessed through three components: 1) prey identification of hard parts from scats collected from haulout and rookery areas; 2) identifiable prey recovered from the digestive tracts of beachcast (i.e. dead/stranded) and subsistence hunted animals; and 3) age estimation from teeth collected from beachcast and subsistence hunted animals. The tissue sampling program for contaminants, aims to put into place a ongoing program to standardize sea lion tissue collection and archiving procedures.

The Tribal Government has partnered with the National Marine Mammal Laboratory, Pacific Identifications Ltd., and the Alaska Marine Mammal Tissue Archival Project to assist training, prey identification, and analysis. This study's success relies on the partnership and contributions of Unangan subsistence hunters on the Pribilof Islands.

For more information about this study please contact Phillip A. Zavadil at 907-546-3230; pazavadil@tgspi.com or visit our website in the coming months at www.tgspi.com.