under the jurisdiction of the United States. These reports must contain information regarding the distribution and abundance of the stocks, population growth rates and trends, estimates of annual human-caused mortality from all sources, descriptions of the fisheries with which the stocks interact, and the status of each stock.

Although many of the items included in the reports were described explicitly in the MMPA, many elements, including a quantitative definition of the parameters used in calculating Potential Biological Removal (PBR) levels, were defined only in general terms. To promote consistent interpretation of the provisions of the law, the NMFS convened a workshop composed of NMFS and FWS scientists in June 1994 to develop preliminary guidelines to be used in preparing draft stock assessments.

On August 23, 1994, the Service published in the Federal Register a notice of availability of draft guidelines and stock assessments (59 FR 43353) for polar bears, Pacific walrus, and Alaska sea otters in Alaska, southern sea otters in California and northern sea otters in Washington State, and West Indian manatees in the southeastern United States and Puerto Rico. A 90-day public comment period expired on November 21, 1994. Substantial background information was provided in that notice, and is not repeated at this time. On November 16, 1994, the Service, in response to public concerns, extended the public comment period through December 1, 1994 (59 FR 59243). This new expiration date provided several additional days for public comment while reducing public confusion by aligning the Service's cut-off date with that of the NMFS; that agency was developing their own stock assessments and had also extended their comment period to December 1, 1994. The Service also concluded that it would allow a reasonable amount of time for the Alaska Scientific Review Group (see next two paragraphs) to review public comments prior to the Group's scheduled meeting of December 12-13,

In addition to the requirements to develop stock assessments, section 117 of the amendments to the MMPA also required the NMFS, in consultation with the Service and others, to establish three independent regional Scientific Review Groups (SRG) representing Alaska, the Pacific Coast (including Hawaii), and the Atlantic Coast (including the Gulf of Mexico). These SRG's were charged with providing advice on the stock assessments and

other issues appropriate for pursuing the goals of the MMPA.

Subsequent to the close of the comment period for the draft stock assessments, the Service provided copies of public comments, as appropriate, to members of the Alaska, Pacific, and Atlantic SRG's for review and consideration. All public comments and the input of the appropriate SRG's was considered by the Service in producing the final stock assessments announced by this Federal Register notice. Final guidelines have also been completed. Following is a brief summary of comments received and the Service's response to those comments.

Comments

Polar Bear

Multiple stock assessment versus single stock assessment. *Comment:* Public comment favored development of two independent stock assessments versus one combined stock assessment for both the Beaufort Sea and Chukchi/Bearing Seas stocks. *Response:* The Service agrees and has recognized the information on the two stocks contained in the initial draft stock assessment into two individual final stock assessments.

Minimum population estimate. Comment: Public comment was not received on the minimum population estimate for the Beaufort Sea stock or lack of an estimate for the Chukchi/ Bearing Seas stock. However, a reanalysis of Service/National Biological Service mark and recapture data for the Beaufort Sea stock resulted in a revised $N_{(\min)}$ estimate of 1,717 animals.

Maximum productivity rates. Comment: One organization, and an observer at the Alaska SRG commented that the initial $R_{(\max)}$ value of 10 percent was greater than observed rates and suggested that a review of data used for the calculation be conducted. Response: The $R_{(\max)}$ from the draft stock assessment was revised based on modeling of observed reproduction and survival rates for polar bears in the Beaufort Sea stock. A 6 percent value is now used.

Mortality. *Comment:* Several commenters suggested that the Service should present the harvest averages for the last 5-year period instead of the longer-term averages. *Response:* The Service concurs and has modified the stock assessments accordingly. A common concern was that modeling the effects of mortality did not account nor make adjustment for the skewed sex ratio of the harvest. The final estimate of the Potential Biological Removal (PBR) level for the Beauford Sea stock

includes the appropriate adjustment for the sex of harvested animals.

Status of stock. *Comment:* One comment stated that polar bear stocks in Alaska should be designated as "strategic" because of the lack of information regarding population size and status, inherently low reproductive capability, and threats emanating from the harvest rates and industry. *Response:* The Service has concluded that the stocks are "non-strategic." The rationale for these decisions are described in detail within the stock assessment and the calculations of PBR.

Pacific Walrus

Minimum population estimate. Comment: Several groups believed this estimate should be based on the estimated population size obtained during the last range-wide aerial survey (1990). They pointed out the survey was conducted during an ice minimum period when only a few walrus were counted along the ice edge. While many walrus were counted on land, presumably many more were in the water and were not counted. Response: The stock assessment report follows guidelines outlined in the NMFS Workshop Report to use the best available scientific information to calculate the minimum population estimate, (N_{min}), not the total estimated population, (N_{best}). The minimum estimate obtained is based on a sum of the direct counts of the walrus observed on land, plus the adjusted estimate of that portion of the population observed on the ice.

Maximum productivity rates. Comment: Several groups suggested the 0.06 value for $R_{\rm max}$ in the draft stock assessment was too low; one group believed it to be too high. *Response:* Commenting groups typically confused the term maximum net productivity, as defined by the amended MMPA and the PBR Workshop, with maximum productivity. The available data for maximum growth at a small population size for the Pacific walrus are scant. Estimated values of R_{max} derived from population models are equivocal. In our reassessment, the Service consulted with experts from several agencies and the Alaska SRG. Recognizing the limitations of the best available data and that the $R_{\text{\scriptsize max}}$ value proposed in the draft stock assessment may not fully account for a skewed sex ratio in the population, the Service chose to follow the recommendation of the Alaska SRG to tentatively adopt 0.08 as a more plausible estimate of R_{max}. The Service is in the process of reviewing available information and is open to revision of