

Pacific Seabird Group



DEDICATED TO THE STUDY AND CONSERVATION OF PACIFIC SEABIRDS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENT

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Renee Orr
5-Year Program Manager
381 Elden Street, MS 4010
Herndon, VA 20170

Dear Ms. Orr:

The Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) wishes to submit comments on Minerals Management Service's Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) Oil and Gas Leasing Program for 2007-2012 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and Proposed Program (PP). We will confine our comments to potential impacts on seabirds in Alaska.

PSG is an international, non-profit organization that was founded in 1972 to promote the knowledge, study, and conservation of Pacific seabirds. It has a membership drawn from the entire Pacific basin, including the United States, Canada, Mexico, South America, Russia, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Among PSG's members are biologists who have research interests in Pacific seabirds, government officials who manage seabird refuges and populations, and individuals who are interested in marine and seabird conservation. Many of our members have done extensive research on seabirds in Alaska, both at breeding colonies and at sea, including for the purpose of evaluating potential impacts of oil and gas exploration and development.

We find that the treatment of marine birds in this DEIS is seriously lacking. In the Affected Environment (Chapter III), information on major parts of these birds' life cycle is lacking, and species that are not threatened or endangered are treated superficially. The most glaring and consistent problem is the failure throughout this DEIS to recognize the fact that seabirds regularly occupy Alaska's marine waters at all times of year, at very high densities in productive areas, and that they depend on these areas for feeding and resting. As a result of these and other problems, the potential impacts of offshore oil leases are greatly understated in the Environmental Consequences chapter (Chapter IV).

The National Audubon Society (2005) has designated several parts of the Chukchi and Bering Seas as Important Bird Areas, because their importance to seabirds calls for special protection. Several

of these IBAs would be directly affected by the proposed lease sales. These include:

- Ledyard Bay (IBA no. 004), a molting and fall staging area for Spectacled Eiders, and a crucial spring feeding area for an estimated 100,000 murrelets and 10,000 kittiwakes.
- Waters off Cape Lisburne and Cape Thompson (IBA no. 006), which provide most food for the breeding seabirds of those two large colonies, and where some birds occupy a polynya in winter.
- The southeast Chukchi Sea (IBA no. 009), a 500-km arc about 100 km northwest of Cape Lisburne. Up to 1 million Short-tailed Shearwaters feed here in late summer, as well as thousands of Northern Fulmars and auklets.
- Bering Strait (IBA no. 018; pending final designation), the major feeding area for the large colonies of seabirds on the Diomed Islands.
- Slime Bank Inner Front (IBA no. 059), north of the lower Alaska Peninsula shore over the 50-meter isobath. Short-tailed Shearwaters concentrate here (up to 700 birds/km²) to obtain vital food after their long migration from Australia.
- Unimak Pass (IBA no. 064), an extraordinarily rich area with several million seabirds at some times. A majority of the world's Short-tailed Shearwaters may pass through this small area during spring and fall migration.

We suggest that the preparers consult a far more complete and heavily referenced survey of seabird life cycles, habitats, and dependence on marine waters in NMFS 2004, pages 3.7-1 to 3.7-84.

Some comments on specific problems:

Page III-125, paragraph 5, and page III-130, paragraph 5: "The short-tailed albatross is a relatively frequent visitor to the Bering Sea and South Alaska Subregions": these areas are in fact the regular feeding range of the species (along with waters off the Aleutian chain). It is true, as stated just below, that the distribution of foraging birds near Alaska is not fully known; however, recent data from radiotelemetry studies by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others should be included.

Page III-129, paragraph 2: "Since ice covers a large proportion of the Bering Sea in winter, any overwintering ... seabirds are concentrated in polynyas ... and in ice front leads." This applies only to the **northern** Bering Sea. Much of the southeastern Bering Sea and Bristol Bay is ice-free in winter, and it is a major wintering area for a variety of seabirds and sea ducks. Moreover, the ice-covered area is shrinking due to global warming, a fact that should be acknowledged in the "Cumulative Impacts" section of Chapter IV.

Page III-133, paragraph 2: The section discusses concern about Marbled Murrelets because of logging (this is correct), but it does not mention that the species feeds in marine waters.

Page IV-142, paragraph 3: This discussion of impacts on seabirds from a spill in the Chukchi Sea is well stated: "Major effects on bird populations during the open-water season are expected to follow a spill. A spill occurring in winter, when birds are virtually absent, still may have serious impacts if substantial quantities of oil are entrained in the ice and then released during the following breeding season."

Page IV-144, last paragraph: This section on impacts in the North Aleutian Basin (i.e., north of the Alaska Peninsula) is inadequate. It lists the groups of birds that could be affected by an oil spill in the area, but then says that “significant adverse effects could occur” only if oil entered a waterfowl staging area, ignoring the high concentrations of seabirds in the immediate area.

Page IV-319, paragraph 4: “While large numbers of Kittlitz’s murrelets, a candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act, occur in Cook Inlet, they nest on cliffs and other areas that would not be expected to come in contact with spilled oil”: Kittlitz’s Murrelets do not nest on cliffs; anyway, since they feed at sea, their nesting habitat is irrelevant to their risk of oil exposure.

Page IV-414, paragraph 4: “Tens of thousands of seabirds sometimes die from starvation or disease or by drowning in fishing nets”: This is an extraordinarily cavalier statement. To be at all meaningful, it must specify species, population sizes, frequency, location, and supporting references.

Same paragraph: “...an oil spill that contaminates critical habitat for a listed species, even when the species is not present, could have devastating impacts”: This is well stated, but we are dismayed that the DEIS often considers impacts only on listed species. Damage to important habitat of any species could be devastating to it.

Page IV-416, paragraph 1: “Most spills ... would be expected to occur in waters well away from coastal areas”: As we have stressed above, many seabird species feed exclusively in such waters, and that is where oil spills damage them.

Same paragraph: “Because most spills under the proposed action would be expected to occur in deep waters, exposure may be limited to marine birds foraging in the vicinity of the accidental release”: once again, the DEIS implies that birds in offshore waters are expendable; on the contrary, they are the majority of many species.

Section IV, Cumulative Impacts: Many more stresses on seabird populations should be considered, including changes in marine currents and sea ice due to global warming (which are already underway, not “unpredictable”), and depletion of prey by commercial fisheries.

On another topic, the Affected Environment’s discussion of tourism and recreation (e.g. page III-191) never mentions that seabird colonies are a major tourist attraction in both Bristol Bay and the Cook Inlet area. Many people enjoy boat trips to those colonies, and tour operators make money from them.

In conclusion, we hope that a future draft of this document will contain accurate descriptions of seabird habitats and distributions at sea. We also hope that it will fairly consider the drastic impacts that even small and infrequent oil spills can have on marine bird populations. These bird populations already face severe challenges, and we strongly urge MMS to withdraw all proposed lease sales in marine areas that are especially important to seabirds, as indicated by Important Bird Area designations.

Sincerely,

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Chair, Pacific Seabird Group

References

National Audubon Society, 2005. The Important Bird Areas Historical Results. Database is in preparation; general information at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/iba>; more extensive data from Dr. Iain Stenhouse, Audubon Alaska, 711 7th St., Anchorage (pers. comm.).

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), 2004. Final Programmatic Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the Alaska Groundfish Fisheries. USDC National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, Alaska Region, Juneau and Seattle.