

Minister of the Environment



Ministre de l'Environnement

Ottawa, Canada K1A 0H3

MAY 1 1 1998

Dr. Alan E. Burger
Chair, Pacific Seabird Group
Biology Department
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia
V8W 3N5

Dear Dr. Burger:

Thank you for your letter dated April 2, concerning the issue of seabird bycatch in salmon gillnet fisheries.

Environment Canada is aware of the potential magnitude of seabird bycatch by fisheries operations throughout the Pacific Basin and is concerned that it be reduced, if possible. We have recently embarked on a study to determine how to accurately assess seabird bycatch in commercial fisheries. Depending on the recommendations of that study, Environment Canada may explore collaborative opportunities with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and our commercial fishing industry to initiate a pilot monitoring project within the next 12 months. That project could involve adding a seabird identification module to the training program for fisheries observers. These observers would then be placed onboard commercial vessels, such as those using experimental gillnets along the east coast of Vancouver Island.

Once the scale of the seabird bycatch in British Columbia waters has been assessed, a subsequent step will be to examine the range of techniques available to alleviate the problem. Again, depending on the threat, Environment Canada may recommend that stakeholders develop guidelines and avoidance procedures for the Strait of Georgia - Puget Sound ecosystem.

Your suggestion of incorporating a collective approach to seabird bycatch management in the sockeye fishery into the Fraser River may be one effective way of reducing seabird mortality. Such recommendations will be considered once formal discussions begin with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the commercial fishing industry, following the results of the pilot monitoring project.

.../2

Canada

- 2 -

In regard to developing a comprehensive strategy for the reduction of the gillnet bycatch, my officials recently participated in the Third Meeting of the Canada/Mexico/United States Trilateral Committee for Wildlife and Ecosystem Conservation and Management, under NAFTA. They indicated then that Environment Canada would help co-ordinate an international seabird bycatch observer program. In addition, during the past year, Environment Canada and the State of Washington have discussed the process of establishing a joint bycatch monitoring program. These interactions have resulted in the compilation of reports on bycatch monitoring programs and techniques for reducing the extent of the impact on seabirds.

Environment Canada recognizes the obligation to address seabird bycatch issues off the west coast of Canada. Accordingly, we have begun to determine how best to monitor the impact of commercial fisheries and we are interacting with bordering jurisdictions, in recognition of the transboundary movements of seabirds. We will need good co-operation among all parties, including my department, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, the government of British Columbia, native, commercial and recreational fisheries, and organizations such as the Pacific Seabird Group to successfully resolve the complex issues.

Yours sincerely,



Christine S. Stewart