

MMS ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM: ONGOING STUDIES

Region: Alaska

Planning Area: Chukchi Sea

Title: COMIDA: Distribution and Relative Abundance of Marine Mammals:
Aerial Surveys (AK-08-02)

MMS Information Need(s) to be Addressed: This study will constitute a key component of Chukchi Sea environmental studies pertinent to Chukchi Sea Lease Sale 193 scheduled for 2007. Industry has expressed strong interest in leasing in this area, likely followed by exploration and possibly development. The COMIDA Workshop in November 1-3, 2006 recommended the monitoring of marine mammal distribution and relative abundance. This study is needed to support post-lease NEPA analysis, ESA Section 7 consultations, and Development and Production Plans (DPPs) for Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) activity in the Chukchi Sea. The monitoring described in this study profile needs to be initiated as soon as possible with results to be available in annual reports and a final report in 2011. MMS analysts and decision makers will use the information in NEPA analysis and documentation for Lease Sales, EPs and DPPs and in post-sale and post-exploration decision making in the Chukchi Sea.

Total Cost: \$3,000,000

Period of Performance: FY 2008 – 2011

Conducting Organization: NMML

MMS Contact: [Chief, Alaska Environmental Studies Section](#)

Description:

Background Bowhead whales (*Balaena mysticetus*), gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*), beluga whales (*Delphinapterus leucas*), Pacific walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus divergens*), polar bears (*Ursus maritimus*), and bearded seals (*Phoca fasciata*), and several other species of ice seals, are known to occupy the Chukchi Sea, at least during some seasons. All of these species are subject to changes in environmental variables such as oceanographic currents, sea temperature, sea ice cover, prey availability, and anthropogenic impacts. Moreover all of these species are used for subsistence by Eskimos both in Russia and the US and form an important part of the diet and cultural base for most people in villages along the Chukchi coast. Having a good understanding of the seasonal distribution, relative abundance, and habitat use of marine mammals in the Chukchi Sea is fundamentally important to evaluating the potential environmental impacts associated with oil and gas exploration and development and other anthropogenic activities. Reliable, up-to-date information of this type is currently unavailable for marine mammal populations in the Chukchi Sea. Aerial surveys of marine mammals are an efficient tool because they offer quick coverage of large marine areas. Past surveys are available for comparison with new data to assess whether changes in distribution or abundance have occurred since the earlier surveys were completed.

Objectives

- Document the distributions and relative densities of marine mammals in the Chukchi Sea Planning Area.
- To the extent possible, delineate the areas that are most important to marine mammals during critical seasons of their annual life history cycles such as molting, calving/pupping, and feeding.

Methods Aerial line transects surveys will be flown in the Chukchi Sea Program Area during: June, July, August, October and early-November. Methodology shall follow protocols used by the MMS Bowhead Whale Aerial Survey Project so that data are comparable with earlier surveys in the Chukchi Sea.

Current Status: In procurement

Final Report Due: NA

Publications Completed: None

Affiliated WWW Sites: <http://www.mms.gov/alaska/>

Revised Date: March 2008