

MMS ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM: ONGOING STUDIES

Region: Alaska

Planning Area: Chukchi Sea

Title: Traditional Knowledge Regarding Bowhead Whales in the Chukchi Sea (AK-93-48-68)

MMS Information Needs to be Addressed: The bowhead whale, an endangered species and a critical subsistence resource for Alaska Native residents, is known to occupy and to pass through the Chukchi Sea. Bowhead whales may be affected in a variety of ways during all stages of oil and gas exploration, development, and production. MMS analysts and decision-makers need to use the best available information to comply with National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) requirements in the preparation of environmental impact statements, environmental assessments, and other documents. Traditional knowledge regarding these whales, including potential predictions of migration timing and feeding areas, has great value in helping to analyze the potential impacts of oil and gas activities in the Chukchi Sea. Study findings will be used in post-sale NEPA analysis, review of exploration plans, development and production plans, and other reviews for post-sale and post-exploration MMS decision-making and mitigation. Also, study results will be used in similar pre-lease analyses and documentation for later Chukchi Sea Lease Sale(s).

Total Cost: (in thousands) \$100
(MMS share) \$50

Period of Performance: FY 2007-2008

Conducting Organization: CMI/UAF

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

Description:

Background The Minerals Management Service has funded a five-year project to place satellite transmitters on up to 25 bowhead whales per year to learn more about migratory patterns, seasonal habitat use, and other aspects of the distribution and movements of bowhead whales in the Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas. In response to plans for this project, the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC) and the North Slope Borough requested that a traditional knowledge component be added to make sure that relevant knowledge accumulated by generations of Iñupiaq and Yup'ik whalers be included along with the results from the transmitters. ConocoPhillips has funded this work in two Beaufort Sea whaling villages, Barrow and Kaktovik, beginning in October 2006. This current study is for a traditional knowledge effort involving the Chukchi Sea whaling village of Wainwright.

Objectives The goal of this project is to gather traditional knowledge about bowhead movements, distribution, and long-term changes in size composition and abundance. The traditional knowledge will then be incorporated into the annual and final reports to MMS for the

bowhead whale satellite-tracking study, and documents will be prepared that compile the information for each village.

- Gather traditional knowledge about bowhead movements, distribution, and long-term changes in size composition and abundance in the Chukchi region and prepare a document compiling that information for Wainwright. This document will be co-authored by a whaler from the region.
- Hold a workshop to discuss tag data along with traditional knowledge that will be incorporated into the annual and final reports to MMS for the bowhead whale satellite-tracking study.

Methods Work with the Wainwright Whaling Captains' Association to identify key individuals for guided discussions. The discussions will document local knowledge of bowhead whale migratory behavior and timing, possible segregation of the population during migration, and changes in abundance and size composition, plus other related information. A focus group will consist of discussions about bowhead movements and behavior by using a map of the area with Mylar overlays on which information can be recorded. A draft report will be provided to each participant for review and correction as necessary. A final report will be sent to the participants, the Wainwright Whaling Captains' Association, and AEWC for approval. After they approve the report, it will be available to others.

A workshop will be held in Wainwright that will include a discussion of the traditional knowledge report under review and data from the bowhead satellite-tracking study. The workshop will provide an opportunity for whalers to discuss how the tracking data relate to their knowledge of what bowheads do in their region.

Current Status: Field work is underway

Final Report Due: September 2008

Publications Completed: None

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

Revised Date: March 2008