

Pribilof Islands Marine Ecosystem (PRIME) Initiative

The federally recognized tribal Aleut communities of St. Paul and St. George are directly experiencing a rapidly transforming marine ecosystem, including alarming declines of fur seals, sea lions, seabirds, fish, crab, and invertebrates, with real costs to wildlife, human and ecosystem health, local economies, and culture. Specifically, northern fur seals (NFS) are one of the highest priorities to the Pribilof Islands Aleut communities. NFS have declined to less than ¼ of the peak historic population estimate of 2.1 million animals.

There are currently limited implemented protection measures for wildlife which have never been evaluated and on-going commercial fisheries management in the Bering Sea has not included tribal government or local Indigenous voices in decision-making in a meaningful way, resulting in an ongoing and urgent need for innovative and adaptable local solutions that provide for environmental, social, and economic successes of our communities. Our desire for an all-inclusive scientific understanding that is grounded in traditional (Indigenous) and local knowledge is essential to facilitate tribal government leadership and restore and protect Aleut connections to our marine ecosystem.

The central focus of the PRIME Initiative is to designate a co-managed marine area that will adequately address our conservation concerns while ensuring the sustainability of our local economies and provide continued fishing opportunities, which are intricately tied to our marine environment. The governance framework of the PRIME will reflect co-management between the federally recognized tribal governments of St. Paul and St. George of the waters within 100 nm of the Pribilof Islands. The proposed mechanism for establishing this area would utilize the existing National Marine Sanctuary Act, which includes existing processes for fishery management actions through the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, but also includes the needed flexibility to achieve co-management of the PRIME ecosystem, while allowing for a balance of cultural, environmental and economic priorities.

Co-management has the potential to provide environmental and societal benefits, as well as technical and financial support in management activities. It can incorporate local and traditional knowledge into resource management decisions and facilitate approaches that are more culturally and ecologically appropriate. A meta-analysis of more than 130 community-based marine co-management arrangements worldwide found that, with strong leadership and support, co-management can contribute to the successful management and sustainability of aquatic resources (Gutierrez et al. 2011).

We recognize the political, social, economic, ecological, and logistical challenges of implementing co-management of the marine environment. It will require unique challenging institutional arrangements, but builds from a strong foundation. We believe that tribal government-led, dynamic conservation and management measures will result in the best management of the PRIME, and provides for the inclusion of our communities, affected industry and other stakeholders, and state and federal representatives throughout the process and implementation. This is an opportunity for our Aleut communities to steward our home waters and to ensure the proper management of the PRIME, rather than an ecosystem that is solely managed, species by species, by the federal government. Indigenous-led conservation efforts in Canada and across the Arctic will provide guidance in successful co-management frameworks that provide streamlined management from our tribal to federal governments and can accomplish timely and meaningful regulations and policies for the PRIME.

