

Agency: Department of Fish and Game**Project Title:****Project Type:** Planning and Research

Marine Mammal and Passenger Vessel Impact Research

State Funding Requested: \$600,000**House District:** Statewide (1-40)

Future Funding May Be Requested

Brief Project Description:

The project is designed to determine how often individual seals are disturbed by vessels, the response of the seals to those disturbances, and determine if the response of the seals may result in negative effects to individual seals or the larger population.

Funding Plan:

Total Project Cost:	\$600,000
Funding Already Secured:	(\$0)
FY2013 State Funding Request:	<u>(\$600,000)</u>
Project Deficit:	\$0

Detailed Project Description and Justification:

In 2002, the NOAA/NMFS in cooperation with the cruise industry, conducted research in Disenchantment Bay. The study looked at seal behavior while cruise ships were present in the bay, focusing on the level of disturbance as vessels approached.

The research was finalized in 2006, concluding that vessel disturbances caused seals to flush from the ice at distances closer than 500 meters. However, the research also indicated that seal population counts are prone to bias and represent "only a fraction of the total population since many remain in the water." In addition, the study attributed harm to seals as a result of ship disturbances, even though the data does not show a decline in population or negative population impact as a result of vessels.

NOAA/NMFS has stated it will soon publish an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rule (ANPR). It is expected the agency will take a conservative approach for new viewing guidelines for harbor seals. The ANPR will likely include potential mitigation via changes in regulation for all vessels, including cruise ships. Two options being discussed are increased viewing distances (e.g. minimum of 500 meters) from harbor seals or significant vessel distance restrictions from the face of glaciers.

If recent research confirmed a negative population impact as a result of vessel traffic, a proactive approach would be justified. However, additional federal regulations could cause a negative impact upon the visitor industry and the economy of Alaska. Glacier viewing is a critical component of what attracts cruise visitors to Alaska. Many destinations have beautiful scenery; however, very few offer the opportunity to get up close to a glacier and experience the wonder of ice towering above the ship and observing large ice calving into the ocean.

The State of Alaska, based upon their seal research, believes additional data is needed to make a more informed decision regarding potential new regulations. State biologists have developed a research proposal which would position the State to

take a proactive approach in collecting data prior to proposed federal regulations. The research could also prove to be a critical component of State and industry response, if federal regulations are too aggressive.

To conduct the research, the State Department of Fish and Game would need an appropriation between \$550,000 and \$650,000, depending on site location. The project is designed to determine how often individual seals are disturbed by vessels, the response of the seals to those disturbances, and determine if the response of the seals may result in negative effects to individual seals or the larger population.

Project Timeline:

FY13-FY15

Entity Responsible for the Ongoing Operation and Maintenance of this Project:

ADF&G

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Has this project been through a public review process at the local level and is it a community priority? Yes No