

## Expanded Adult Herring Surveys

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**Introduction.** The current management of the Prince William Sound (PWS) herring stock by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) depends heavily on hydroacoustic surveys. Biomass estimates from these surveys provide a direct measure of the stock abundance and are also a primary input into the age-structured assessment (ASA) model that is the primary forecasting tool. The hydroacoustic surveys were initiated in 1993 when fishers were unable to locate concentrations of herring despite a forecast for high abundance. The high forecast was based on an ASA model that relied on age-structure information alone. The hydroacoustic survey revealed that the population had collapsed. March 2011 will mark the 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive annual survey using hydroacoustic surveys. Over this time period the hydroacoustic survey has shown to be an early and accurate measure of the herring stock abundance and compares well with the recent ASA model estimates that now incorporate hydroacoustic survey information as well as an index of male spawning abundance.

Prior to 2001, the hydroacoustic surveys were conducted exclusively by the Prince William Sound Science Center (PWSSC). Since 2001, the effort has been shared between PWSSC and the Cordova office of Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Over the past 3 years, the PWSSC effort has been supported by EVOS TC. The cooperative effort has been critical since both PWSSC and ADF&G have limited resources for this effort. While ADF&G considers the hydroacoustic surveys to be critical (Steve Moffitt, personal communication) the lack of a commercial herring fishery in PWS since 1998 has reduced management priorities for herring during a time of overall limited funding for the state agency. Thus the PWSSC contribution has become critically important for the long-term, especially if a future fishery appears only a remote possibility.

With the level of effort available over the past several years, PWSSC has achieved herring biomass estimates with a precision of about  $\pm 30\%$ . This level of precision is insufficient for management purposes. The level of effort available to ADF&G is similarly insufficient. However, the combined effort currently meets management requirements for precision. There is concern that some concentrations of fish are not located and surveyed under current levels, in which case the estimate is biased, a factor not incorporated into variance calculations for precision.

**Objectives.** The objective of this study are:

1. to increase the current survey area of adult spawning beyond the Port Gravina and Fidalgo area to provide a more precise estimate of spawning biomass.

**Methods.** In this proposal for expanded adult herring surveys, we propose an effort level that will meet management needs for precision when combined with the ADF&G effort, and will also reduce current levels of uncertainty with regard to adequate geographic coverage. Beginning in FY2013 and continuing until 2016, hydroacoustic surveys will be conducted in late spring (April-May) to assess adult spawning

biomass. Based on an exhaustive review of historic survey coverage, we have determined the effort required to be eight days of vessel survey for PWSSC in addition to that available to ADF&G. ADF&G will continue to conduct direct sampling for age/length/weight, primarily with a 17 FA purse seine, including concentrations located by the PWSSC effort. PWSSC effort will emphasize search for and surveys of concentrations outside the Port Gravina/Port Fidalgo area where the herring have been concentrated during the past several years. Direct capture will be conducted using a midwater trawl at adult spawning sites (See Bishop, this proposal). As has been the case previously, the search effort will utilize all information available including historical records of sighting of both adults and spawn, reports of marine mammal/bird concentrations and some aerial survey effort as well as high speed vessel surveys.