



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

Polar Bear Summit June 1-2, 2016 Nome, AK Open Session Summary

On 1-2 June 2016, the Marine Mammal Commission (MMC), in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Alaskan Nanuq Commission (ANC), Kawerak, and the North-Slope Borough (NSB), co-convened a summit in Nome, Alaska, to discuss polar bear co-management and implementation of the [U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Bilateral Agreement](#) (Agreement). The summit was prompted by concerns MMC heard during its February [2016 Alaska listening sessions](#). One of the primary issues raised at the listening sessions was the state of co-management of marine mammal species and specifically concerns about FWS's intent to issue regulations implementing the Agreement that would potentially restrict polar bear hunting by Alaska Natives.

The primary objectives of the Polar Bear Summit were to discuss:

- Alaska Native representation in the co-management of polar bears with FWS
- ways to improve communication among co-management partners and the affected hunting communities, and
- actions needed to implement U.S. obligations under the Agreement and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA)¹.

Invitations to the summit were extended to the 15 ANC Commissioners (one from each of the Alaska Native village engaged in hunting polar bears), as well as tribal representatives from all of the coastal native villages. Overall, there were 49 attendees at the meeting in Nome, representing the villages of Barrow, Brevig Mission, Diomede, Kaktovik, Kotzebue, Nome, Nuiqsut, Point Hope, Point Lay, Savoonga, Shishmaref, Wainwright, and Wales. In addition to MMC, FWS, NSB, and Kawerak, there was also representation from the Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, Bering Straits Native Corporation, the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, the Inupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, the Eskimo Walrus Commission, the Voice of the Arctic Inupiat, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Department of the Interior Office of the Secretary. The meeting was moderated by Mr. Sky Starkey of Anchorage.

The two day summit began with introductions and statements on perspectives regarding polar bear co-management and the importance of polar bears to Alaska Native subsistence and culture. FWS then provided an overview of the history and status of the Agreement. Concerns were raised about the harvest limits that would be established under the Agreement and the boundary for the Chukchi Sea population of polar bears. MMC Chairman Daryl Boness emphasized that timely implementation of the Agreement was key to conservation of the Chukchi Sea polar bear population, but that harvest limits and the stock boundary should be based on good science. He

¹ This objective was not discussed during the course of the summit due to time restraints.

emphasized the need to analyze all available population and harvest data on polar bears and to engage the IUCN polar bear specialists in reviewing the available data.

After the presentation of background information, the Alaska Native participants met in an extended closed session to discuss amongst themselves how they wanted to move forward with polar bear co-management and implementation of the Agreement. FWS was called on during the closed session to provide additional information and clarification on various aspects of the Agreement and the negotiation process.

Ultimately, the Alaska Native participants agreed to continue to support ANC as their representative in polar bear co-management. However, several participants raised concerns about ANC's financial stability and previous lack of engagement with, or representation from, the villages regarding the development or terms of the Agreement. Of primary concern going forward were federal audits indicating inappropriate expenditures of federal dollars by ANC and whether those debts might be forgiven—a decision which FWS indicated would be reviewed by Department of Justice. FWS expressed their willingness to continue to recognize ANC as its partner in polar bear co-management but clarified that no additional funding could be provided until ANC financial issues were resolved.

At the conclusion of the summit, the Alaska Native participants expressed their appreciation to FWS and MMC for the opportunity to have all of the affected communities meet and discuss these difficult issues, and the need to improve communications with the affected communities in issues affecting polar bear conservation and the availability of polar bears for subsistence use.