

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

For

The Reintroduction of Steller's Eiders to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Alaska

The Alaska Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to reintroduce Steller's eiders to the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta (YKD) in order to reestablish this subpopulation. Reestablishment of this subpopulation is necessary to meet the recovery criteria outlined in the Steller's Eider Recovery Plan for Alaska-breeding Steller's eiders which were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1997. In addition, returning this bird to its former range will help restore the natural diversity of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge.

Reintroduction efforts will occur for several years. This project will use adaptive management techniques to incorporate new information, reduce uncertainties, and minimize risk. Program implementation will include captive propagation of Steller's eiders, habitat assessment and release site selection, release of captive eggs / birds into the wild including the use of surrogate hens, and monitoring to evaluate progress and inform future decisions. These phases are not sequential, but concurrent: releases will likely occur in multiple years; monitoring will take place annually to inform future decisions; and, we may need to conduct new site assessments within the YKD if changing release sites is necessary. Small-scale, short-term predator control, which may include the lethal take of foxes, may take place at release sites.

In an Environmental Assessment (EA), the Service analyzed impacts to both biological and human components of the environment for the preferred alternative (reintroduction) and a no action alternative. The Draft EA describing these alternatives and their potential impacts was made available for public comment in October 2015. A copy of the written comments received and our responses to them is included as an Appendix of the Final EA.

As described in the EA, the reintroduction of Steller's eiders to the YKD is anticipated to result in negligible impacts to other avian species nesting in the area through disturbance. A formal risk analysis, biosecurity protocols for the source flock of Steller's eiders, and on-going regular disease screening all indicate the risk of disease transmission from captive birds to wild populations is low. Since hens of other waterfowl species will be used as surrogates, reproductive success of these individuals would be reduced. However, given the population sizes of potential surrogate species on the YKD (multiple thousands of individuals), the loss of <40 clutches would not result in significant impacts to local populations.

If predator control is implemented, impacts to avian species are confined to minimal, short term disturbance. Mammalian predators (foxes) may be lethally taken immediately prior to, and during the nesting and early brood rearing period. In addition to the temporal limits, lethal

removal of mammalian predators would be limited to the area immediately adjacent to the release site. We estimate <20 foxes would be lethally removed each year. Given the relatively low number of animals which may be lethally removed, the limited spatial extent of any predator control efforts, and the short duration of the effort (limited to a few weeks), we expect any impacts to the fox population would be localized, temporary, and not significant.

Reintroduction will take place in areas which Alaska Natives live and conduct subsistence activities. This National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) analysis is only a small portion of on-going coordination with communities, tribes, and corporations in the affected area. We began government to government consultation prior to formally proposing reintroduction, and will continue to communicate with, and seek input from, potentially-affected Alaska Native tribes and corporations during all phases of the reintroduction program.

No adverse socioeconomic impacts or impacts to cultural or historic resources are likely to result from the proposed action. As reintroduction efforts will take place in a relatively small geographic area, and field operations are conducted for short periods of time, no adverse impacts to subsistence resources or practices are anticipated. More importantly, we will continue to coordinate activities with subsistence users in the local communities of the central YKD area. This will help us avoid or minimize any potential unforeseen impacts. We received interest, encouragement, and logistical support from the communities during scoping, subsequent community meetings, and habitat assessment work completed to inform the project. We intend to work with local residents to help ensure the project has positive outcomes for conservation and the communities.

Regional leaders have expressed a concern about the consequences of inadvertent shooting of Steller's eiders which have been closed to hunting under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act since 1997. It is possible that a reintroduced Steller's eider may be shot. However, given the low numbers of birds, and based on our discussions in the communities where hunters expressed an ability and willingness to avoid inadvertent shooting, we think the probability of such an incident occurring is very low. Further, we intend to continue to work with subsistence hunters to minimize to the extent practicable the potential for inadvertent take of reintroduced birds. This type of collaborative effort has been demonstrated to be highly effective on the YKD in the past.

Reintroducing Steller's eiders to the YKD is not likely to result in significant detrimental cumulative impacts. Through the use of adaptive management, on-going community involvement, and compliance with all State, Federal, and local permits, this project should have minimal adverse effects and significant positive effects.

Based on my review and evaluation of the Final Environmental Assessment and other supporting documentation, I have determined that the reintroduction of Steller's eiders to the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta in Alaska is not a major Federal action which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the NEPA.

Therefore, preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement on the proposed action is not required.

Kelland Clark

Regional Director, Alaska Region

Date: 25 April 2016