



## Questions and answers about polar bear management in the Chukchi Sea region under the U.S.-Russia Agreement

### **Q: What is the purpose of the U.S.-Russia Agreement?**

A: The U.S.-Russia Agreement (hereafter the “Agreement”) is an international treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation intended to improve polar bear conservation and safeguard the cultural and traditional use of polar bears by Native peoples.

### **Q: Which polar bear population does the Agreement apply to?**

A: The Agreement applies to the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population, which inhabits the Chukchi and Bering seas and is shared between the U.S. and Russia.

### **Q: What are the greatest threats to the Alaska-Chukotka population?**

A: Sea ice loss resulting from climate change and reported high levels of human-caused mortality in Chukotka are concerns for this population.

### **Q: Who is responsible for management of polar bears under the Agreement?**

A: In the U.S., management of the Alaska-Chukotka population is the responsibility of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Alaska Nanuq Commission (ANC), and local communities.

### **Q: Which Alaskan villages are affected by the Agreement?**

A: The Agreement affects management of polar bears in coastal villages to the west and south of Point Lay, including Point Lay.

### **Q: Who makes decisions under the Agreement?**

A: Management decisions are made by a four-member Commission consisting of a Native and federal representative from the U.S. and Russia. Charlie Johnson, Executive Director of the ANC, is the Alaska Native commissioner, and Charles Brower is his alternate. Geoff Haskett, Alaska Regional Director of the USFWS, is the federal representative.

### **Q: Why is the Agreement important to Chukotkan Natives?**

A: The Agreement is important to Native peoples of Chukotka because it re-establishes their ability to hunt polar bears for subsistence purposes. Prior to this Agreement, any hunting of polar bears (including by Native peoples) had been illegal in Russia since 1956.

### **Q: Why is the Agreement important to Alaska Natives?**

A: The Agreement is important to Native peoples of Alaska because it is expected to reduce the high level of illegal killing in Russia. If not reduced, continued removal of large numbers of polar bears from this population would eventually limit the number of polar bears available to hunters in Alaska.

**Q: How are Alaskan and Chukotkan Natives involved in management of polar bears under the Agreement?**

A: The Agreement ensures the full involvement of Native people of Alaska and Chukotka through equal representation on the Commission and membership in the scientific working group that advises the Commission. In the U.S., the ANC and the USFWS will be working closely with local communities to inform them of activities under the Agreement and to solicit input into the process. Local communities will play a direct role in determining the distribution and management of polar bear harvest. A traditional and local ecological knowledge study is also being initiated so that this information can be incorporated into management decisions made under the Agreement.

**Q: Is polar bear harvest allowed under the Agreement?**

A: Yes. The Agreement recognizes that polar bears are a valuable subsistence harvest species and affirms the authorization of Native people of Alaska and Chukotka to hunt polar bears for cultural and traditional uses.

**Q: What types of harvest are legal under the Agreement?**

A: Only subsistence harvest by coastal Alaska Natives. Hunting for sport or commercial gain is prohibited.

**Q: Have Alaskan and Chukotkan Natives historically harvested polar bears?**

A: Yes, Alaska Natives have a long history of harvesting polar bears for subsistence purposes, and continue to do so today. Subsistence use of polar bears by Chukotkan Natives is well documented, but was banned in 1956 and remained illegal until the Agreement was signed and the Commission agreed to a shared harvest limit. Polar bears provide a source of nutrition and play an important traditional and cultural role in these communities.

**Q: What progress has been made since the Agreement was signed in 2000?**

A: Congress passed legislation to implement the Agreement in 2007 and held the first meeting of the U.S.-Russia Commission in September 2009 in Moscow, Russia. The Commission adopted rules of procedure and identified a scientific working group to advise the Commission. The Commission tasked the scientific working group with identifying a sustainable harvest level for the Alaska-Chukotka population. No changes to existing harvest practices in either country were adopted at this meeting.

In March 2010, the scientific working group met in Anchorage, Alaska to develop a report, including recommendations on potential sustainable harvest levels. In early June 2010, a harvest workshop was held to exchange information regarding the standardization of harvest regulations and monitoring practices in the U.S. and Russia.

In June 2010, the second meeting of the Commission was held in Anchorage, Alaska. At this meeting the Commissioners agreed to a joint quota of 58 polar bears, of which no more than 19 will be females, to be split evenly between the U.S. and Russia. The Commission agreed that implementation of a regulated harvest will occur when legislative and enforcement mechanisms are in place.

**Q: Is there a limit on polar bear harvest?**

A: Yes, a limit has been identified but has not yet been implemented. In Alaska, the quota of 29 bears (the U.S. share of the total quota for the population) will not go into effect until a system is in place to manage a regulated harvest. Until that time, harvest will continue as currently managed by the USFWS Marking, Tagging, and

Reporting Program. Hunters should continue to report and tag harvested polar bears within 30 days with their local tagger.

**Q: When will the harvest limit take effect?**

A: The harvest limit will not take effect until the new management system is in place. This is expected to occur by early 2013. Over the next year, the ANC will work with the USFWS and local communities to identify the best procedures for implementing the quota. Local communities are encouraged to provide input into this process by contacting their local ANC commissioner or the ANC office in Nome at 907-443-5044 ([www.nanuuq.info](http://www.nanuuq.info)) or the USFWS Marine Mammals Management program at 1-800-362-5148.

**Q: Are there restrictions on harvest other than the limit?**

A: Yes, harvest is limited to coastal natives of Alaska and Chukotka and for the purposes of subsistence or to manufacture and sell handicrafts and clothing. Additional restrictions on harvest include prohibition of the taking of females with cubs, cubs less than one year of age, and bears in dens. Aircraft, poisons, traps, snares, and large motorized vehicles cannot be used to harvest polar bears.

**Q: How is harvest shared between the U.S. and Russia?**

A: Harvest is divided evenly between Native peoples of Alaska and Chukotka. The Alaskan share of the harvest is 29 polar bears per year, which is slightly lower than the average of 34 polar bears harvested each year between 2004 and 2008.

**Q: How was the harvest limit determined?**

A: The U.S.-Russia Commission set the current harvest limit. At the June 2010 meeting, the Commission tasked those members of the scientific working group present at the meeting (7 of 12 members, including the U.S. and Russian co-chairs) to evaluate the population-level effects of removing 58 polar bears per year, which includes four more females than originally recommended by the scientific working group in their report to the Commission (15 females and 30 males were originally recommended). Population models developed by the scientific working group to evaluate the relative effects of different harvest levels indicated that a harvest of up to 19 females per year was likely sustainable in the short term. Further, the co-chairs of the scientific working group acknowledged that the conservation value of a regulated harvest likely outweighed this risk. This conclusion was based on the fact that a maximum of 58 human-caused removals per year represents a significant reduction from the current human-caused removal level of approximately 219 bears per year (i.e., 34 from the U.S. and 185 from Russia, the midpoint of estimated removals for Russia). The Commission acknowledged that subsistence harvest plays an important cultural and traditional role for Native peoples, and agreed unanimously on a quota of 58 bears.

**Q: Does Alaska's other polar bear population, which occurs in the southern Beaufort Sea, have a harvest limit?**

A: Yes. Harvest of the Southern Beaufort Sea population is limited under a voluntary agreement between the Inupiat of Alaska and the Inuvialuit of Canada. For over 20 years, this agreement has kept harvest levels sustainable and met the subsistence needs of Native communities.

**Q: If polar bears are threatened by climate change, why did the Commission allow any harvest?**

A: Currently, high levels of human-caused removal are a significant threat to this population and, unlike sea ice loss, can be affected by management actions. The harvest limit selected by the Commission of 58 polar bears per year represents a significant reduction from the current human-caused removal level of approximately 219

bears per year (i.e., 34 from the U.S. and 185 from Russia, the midpoint of estimated removals for Russia). Given the unknown status of the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population, the scientific working group acknowledged the potential for this population to be growing due to high biological productivity in the region and initial observations from a three-year capture program in this area suggesting that bears may be maintaining body condition and reproduction despite documented sea ice loss. Based on this information, the scientific working group supported that continued harvest is likely to be sustainable for this population in the short term. Furthermore, the Commission acknowledged the importance of involving local communities in polar bear conservation efforts, and that legalization of harvest in Russia with an accompanying management and enforcement system is the best means to reduce total human-caused removals and promote conservation.

**Q: How will recent progress under the Agreement, including the establishment of a harvest limit, promote the conservation of the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population?**

A: The quota identified by the Commission, if adhered to, represents a significant reduction from the current estimated human-caused removal level of 219 polar bears per year, to 58 polar bears per year. Over the short term, this lower level of harvest is likely to be sustainable. The quota can be adjusted as new biological information becomes available for the Alaska-Chukotka population.

**For questions or comments, please contact:**

Marine Mammals Management  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1011 E. Tudor Rd., MS341  
Anchorage, AK 99503

Phone: (907) 786-3800 or 1-800-362-5148

Fax: (907) 786-3816

Website: <http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/index.htm>