UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (5:09)

STELLER'S EIDER (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH KAREN LAING)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello, there. This is Sarah Leon with the Fish and Wildlife Service and I'm on the phone today with Karen LAING, the Eider Recovery Coordinator from the Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office. Hi, Karen, how are you today?

MS. LAING: Great. Thanks. How are you?

MS. LEON: I'm doing well. Would you mind talking to us a little about the Steller's eider today?

MS. LAING: Sure. Steller's eider is a small sea duck and they have a really fascinating lifestyle. They live in the Arctic, nesting along the coast of Russia and Alaska so they're a northern species pretty much confined in the north.

MS. LEON: All right, and I understand the global population of Steller's eider is estimated to have declined approximately 50 percent since the 1960s. What happened?

MS. LAING: Well, we're not quite sure. And in fact, we've just cobbled together various surveys to make that estimate worldwide because there hasn't been a real cohesive effort to count those birds throughout their range since they occur in Europe, in Russia, and in Alaska. But that's the guess that we have, that they appeared to have made that decline. We have some theories about why they've declined at least in Alaska, possibly other places, and those include shooting.

The birds have been shot, harvested through the 20th century. In addition, they are subject to lead poisoning from spent leadshot in places where hunting is done on their breeding grounds which occurs certainly in Alaska and in Russia. So what happens is they'll be looking for food in ponds and they'll pick up these lead pellets that have been dropped when hunters are shooting at wildlife and that can poison them. So that's a second potential cause of their decline.

And then in addition, there may be changes in predator populations in breeding grounds that may be more of a problem than they were before, just because of the changes in human habitation and garbage that may make some predators such as foxes more available on breeding grounds.

MS. LEON: So what recovery actions are currently underway?

MS. LAING: Well, we're certainly trying to address all three of those issues in Alaska. Only the Alaska breeding population is actually listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, so we focus our recovery actions here in Alaska. Certainly, it's been illegal to shoot waterfowl with leadshot since 1991, but you can still use it in many places for upland game. And so we've worked hard with local communities on the North Slope of Alaska and the Yukon Delta so that local communities have actually asked the state to prohibit leadshot use for just about all small game in those areas where these birds are nesting. And that has now happened.

The State of Alaska has prohibited the use of leadshot on the North Slope and on the Yukon Delta for most small game. So that's one big thing we've done, along with a lot of education about not shooting the birds. Not using leadshot and on their breeding grounds near Barrow, there is also some predator control.

MS. LEON: With climate change, what are the future implications with this?

MS. LAING: Well, climate change could certainly affect Steller's eiders. We don't know too much about how it might affect them in their wintering areas which are marine coastal areas and we're starting to do some research now in some of those habitats including eel grass habitats which are very important for wintering Steller's eiders. We're just beginning to study that.

The wetlands of the Yukon Delta and the North Slope are going to be changing with climate change, but the ways those will change are still quite varied. We're not sure. Some areas may become wetter. Some may become drier.

Certainly, there's a risk of rising sea level. One of the important things for recovery of Steller's eiders is that in order to be considered recovered under the Endangered Species Act, we need to have a good population on the Yukon Delta in western Alaska. And right now, they're almost no birds nesting there. So we're considering reintroducing them to the Yukon Delta and we're working with our

partners, which include the Alaska Sea Life Center to raise captive flocks of Steller's eiders and investigate the possibility of reintroducing them to Yukon Delta where they have traditionally nested.

And of course, as the climate is changing, we have to do a lot of careful research to make sure that there's still going to be good habitat for us to reintroduce the birds. So we'll be looking at climate change for direct effects on the birds and their habitat and also for consideration as we look for appropriate ways to reintroduce these birds to the wild.

I'd like to add that we have an incredible number of great partners that we work with including the State of Alaska, Bureau of Land Management, the North Slope Borough, our Refuges and Migratory Birds Offices, Sea Life Center, as well as biologists in Russia who help us out and other organizations. So it takes a huge partnership to try to help these birds in the Arctic.

MS. LEON: That's right. Recovery is not possible without the help of partners. So thank you for mentioning them as well
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MS. LAING: Well, thank you.

MS. LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thank you for listening.

(Music plays.Whereupon, the interview was concluded)