National Seabird Program Five-Year Strategic Plan: 2020-2024

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U.S. Department of Commerce
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U.S. Department of Commerce
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National Seabird Program

Five-Year Strategic Plan: 2020-2024

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National Seabird Program Five-Year Strategic Plan: 2020-2024

I. Introduction and Background

History of the National Seabird Program

Executive Order 13186 (EO 13186; Appendix 1), Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, was issued in 2001 to promote the conservation of migratory bird populations. As directed by this order, NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) formalized a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU; Appendix 2) that placed special emphasis on minimizing the impact of fishery interactions on seabirds, and the maintenance of healthy habitats and forage fish for seabirds.[1] Also in 2001, the U.S. finalized its National Plan of Action for Reducing the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (NPOA-Seabirds; Appendix 3), and directed NOAA Fisheries to work with Fishery Management Councils[2] ("FMCs" or "Councils"), USFWS, and U.S. Department of State to mitigate seabird bycatch domestically and internationally.

In 2001, NOAA Fisheries Assistant Administrator William Hogarth created a National Seabird Coordinator position to maintain a national perspective through coordinated regional activities pertaining to EO 13186 and the NPOA-Seabirds through a memorandum to NMFS leadership (Memorandum on the Establishment of the NMFS National Seabird Coordinator; Appendix 4). Each science center and regional and headquarters office was directed to (1) review EO 13186 and send comments regarding the content of the MOU to be developed with USFWS that this EO directed; (2) review the NPOA-Seabirds and begin its implementation; and (3) designate one staff contact person to work with the Coordinator on seabird issues pertaining to these two directives. Milestones associated with these directives were also drafted.

The National Seabird Coordinator and regional points of contact were formalized into NOAA Fisheries' National Seabird Program (NSP) in a memo to Assistant Administrator Eric Schwaab and Chief Science Advisor for Fisheries Steven Murawski in 2011 (Memorandum Formalizing the NMFS National Seabird Program; Appendix 5). That memo formalized the Coordinator's primary roles and responsibilities, transferred the NSP to the Office of Science and Technology (OST), and directed the Office of

[1] This MOU expired in 2017 and has not yet been renewed.
[2] The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act created eight fishery management councils to develop fishery management plans for the Federal fisheries under their jurisdiction that are in need of conservation and management.

Sustainable Fisheries to continue to work with the Coordinator on bycatch-related issues. It provided an overview of recommendations from the 2009 National Seabird Workshop (see below); these included creation of a National Seabird Strategic Plan and participation in the FY2013-2017 planning cycle with the intent of enhancing the NSP budget. The memo also summarized recommendations from the Science Board; these included emphasizing the importance of promoting seabirds as ecological indicators, maintaining the focus on seabird bycatch, and developing and implementing a National Seabird Strategic Plan.

A 2015 memo to Assistant Administrator Eileen Sobeck, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs Samuel Rauch III, and Director of Scientific Programs and Chief Science Advisor Richard Merrick designated a new National Seabird Coordinator (successor to the previous coordinator, who had retired); clarified roles and responsibilities of that position and regional NSP points of contact; and provided updates regarding the NSP (Memorandum on the Appointment of new NMFS National Seabird Coordinator; Appendix 6). With the retirement of the National Seabird Coordinator in 2019, a memo to Assistant Administrator Chris Oliver, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs Samuel Rauch III, and Director of Scientific Programs and Chief Science Advisor Cisco Werner designated a new National Seabird Coordinator; this memo again clarified roles and responsibilities of that position and regional NSP points of contact; and provided updates regarding the NSP (Memorandum on the Appointment of new NMFS National Seabird Coordinator; Appendix 7). The two key focus areas of the NSP were reaffirmed: addressing seabird bycatch (through monitoring, estimating, and mitigation), and promoting seabirds as ecosystem indicators.

Today, the NSP is a cross-cutting group of managers and scientists who work domestically and internationally to protect and conserve seabirds. NSP activities are guided by statutes, policies, and emerging agency priorities. The NSP works through representation on steering committees and working groups within and external to NOAA Fisheries and through partnerships with other NOAA Line Offices, regional Fishery Management Councils, the States, and other Federal agencies. The NSP is represented through points of contact in all science centers and regional and headquarters offices. As such, it is a nationally coordinated program that benefits from significant leveraging at the regional level.

The 2009 National Seabird Program Workshop

In September 2009, NOAA Fisheries convened a National Seabird Workshop (Rivera et al. 2014). This was the first in-person, comprehensive planning exercise for the NSP. The primary goal of the workshop was to initiate the development of a National Seabird Implementation Plan to (1) describe NOAA Fisheries' seabird activities and important partnerships, (2) guide NOAA Fisheries' seabird management science, and (3) provide seabird-related input to NOAA's strategic planning and budgeting process. Individuals from all six NOAA Fisheries regions and a number of headquarters offices, plus invited participants from USFWS, the U.S. Geological Survey, the North Pacific Fishery

Management Council, private consulting firms, universities, and private citizens, attended. The first day was devoted to background presentations; the following two days were devoted to breakout groups to explore regional strategies to address issues associated with four themes: (1) pelagic seabird abundance and distribution and overlap with fisheries; (2) anthropogenic impacts and mitigation; (3) management and coordination within and between agencies and with stakeholders on shared objectives; and (4) ecosystem approach to management – seabirds as indicators of marine health.

Six themes emerged as areas to be focused on in a five-year timeframe: (1) continuing to work on seabird bycatch issues; (2) improving connections, networks, and outreach; (3) creating a multi-agency/entity inventory of spatial/temporal coverage of existing data and data collection methods; (4) using seabirds as indicators to improve ecosystem-based approaches to management; (5) formalizing the seabird program and adding necessary infrastructure; and (6) augmenting policy approaches.

Three major steps were identified to begin implementation of these priorities: (1) create a report of the workshop (subsequently published as Rivera et al. 2014); (2) create a National Seabird Strategic Plan; and (3) create alternatives for the fiscal year cycle of NOAA's strategic planning and budgeting process.

Subsequent to the workshop, the NSP and a steering committee developed a mission statement: "*Maintain seabirds as integral components of healthy and resilient ocean ecosystems by conducting research on and mitigating threats to seabirds in the ocean and near-shore environment, and by raising awareness of National Marine Fisheries Service seabird-related activities and responsibilities*" (Rivera et al. 2014). Six program goals were also identified:

(1) quantify, reduce, and mitigate impacts on seabirds due to fisheries;
(2) incorporate seabird ecology into NOAA Fisheries' ecosystem approach to management;
(3) raise awareness of NOAA Fisheries' seabird activities;
(4) develop, implement, and maintain a National Seabird Program strategic plan;
(5) support NOAA Fisheries' regional seabird activities through obtaining funding and other resources; and
(6) facilitate communication among NOAA Fisheries' regional seabird programs to identify issues of common interest and opportunities for collaboration.

The 2018 Meeting of the National Seabird Program

In May of 2018, NSP convened a two-day meeting (Ballance et al. 2019) focused on achieving two goals: (1) revisit and refine the NSP mission and vision; and (2) draft a five-year NSP strategic plan. NSP representatives from every NOAA Fisheries science center, and regional and headquarters office, as well as invited participants from NOAA's National Ocean Service, USFWS, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), and regional fishery management councils were in attendance. Five strategic

initiatives were identified by a steering committee prior to the meeting, agreed upon by members of the National Seabird Program, and developed during the meeting:

(1) monitor and estimate seabird bycatch;
(2) mitigate seabird bycatch;
(3) strengthen key partnerships;
(4) promote seabirds in advancing ecosystem-based fisheries management; and
(5) elevate awareness of and support for the NSP.

The strategic plan documented here is based on discussions at and subsequent to this meeting. Refinement of the NSP mission statement will continue based on modifications suggested during the meeting.

II. NSP's Strategic Plan: 2020-2024

Strategic Initiative 1: Monitor and Estimate Seabird Bycatch

Bycatch (unintentional catch) of seabirds via hooking or entanglement in fishing gear is a common threat worldwide. Seabirds are attracted to fishing vessels and fishing operations—offal and bait can be tempting sources of "free food." As well, seabirds and fisheries often operate in the same geographic region, even at small spatial scales, and seabirds can accidentally become hooked or entangled in fishing gear during fishing operations. Depending on the geographic region, fisheries in the United States may interact with species of albatross, cormorants, gannet, loons, pelicans, auks, gulls, petrels, storm-petrels, shearwaters, and terns, among others.

Monitoring fisheries bycatch and estimating its magnitude are critical to effective conservation and management. Monitoring provides baseline data and provides a means to identify emerging issues and challenges pertaining to fisheries interactions with seabirds. Critical components of monitoring include fisheries observer programs that include training in seabird identification, standardization of data collection, and rigorous data management practices pertaining to data documentation, quality assurance and quality control, and archiving. Estimation of bycatch depends on rigorous analytical methods, which are continually evolving and improving. And to the extent practicable, consistency in monitoring practices and bycatch estimation across regions, within a particular fishery, will improve NOAA Fisheries' ability to monitor and estimate bycatch.

<u>Goal 1: Work with NOAA Fisheries observer programs to standardize seabird bycatch data collection protocols and format, and ensure that seabird data are collected and effectively documented, communicated (internally and externally), integrated, quality checked, and archived.</u>

- Milestones

    - Periodically review type and quality of seabird bycatch data and data collection protocols, and use results of reviews to identify minimum standards, and improve practices and protocols.
    - Establish protocols for reporting data from fisheries bycaught seabirds that are tagged (leg bands or similar).
    - Establish a regular “virtual” series of meetings to discuss best practices, emerging issues, and use of technologies to improve data collection and documentation.
    - Work with observer programs to develop standardized protocols for collecting seabird bycatch data.
    - Develop data collection practices so as to best document nature of seabird interaction with fisheries gear and post-capture condition of live seabirds with a goal of better documenting post-release mortality.
    - Maintain current and develop new partnerships to maximize data collection from seabird bycatch carcasses, using the Pacific seabird necropsy program as a possible model.
- Points of Contact (POC): NSP Coordinator with National Observer Program Advisory Team (NOPAT), Office of Science and Technology (OST) Protected Species Science Branch, Regional Observer Programs

<u>Goal 2: Ensure fisheries observers have training and skills to collect high-quality seabird bycatch data, including species/subspecies identification, safe-handling practices, and assessment of condition.</u>

- Milestones
    - Create an online resource that compiles seabird-related training materials.
    - Convene periodic seabird training workshops and/or participate in existing fisheries observer trainings to communicate seabird-specific information.
    - Ensure that fisheries observers are provided with effective tools (e.g., cameras, measuring tools) to collect rigorous seabird bycatch data.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with NOPAT

<u>Goal 3: Continually revise and develop new analytical approaches to estimate seabird bycatch.</u>

- Milestones
    - Establish regular communication mechanisms with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and others to best place seabird bycatch estimates in a broader context of population abundance and status.
    - Work to include seabird bycatch estimation methods as part of larger fora within (e.g., Protected Species Assessment Workshops) and external (e.g., Pacific Seabird Group meetings) to the agency focused on estimation of bycatch. Place special focus on challenges associated with cryptic mortality, data-poor environments, new analytical methods. Share lessons learned across regions.

- Investigate analytical approaches designed to identify/clarify drivers of bycatch (i.e., fishery characteristics, biological assemblages, and environmental parameters) to better understand mechanisms and potential mitigation solutions.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with OST's Protected Species Science Branch Chief, Office of Protected Resources' (OPR) Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Coordinator

Strategic Initiative 2: Mitigate Bycatch

Bycatch mitigation is a critically important component of conservation and effective management for many marine organisms. There are many forms of bycatch mitigation, ranging from modification of fishing practices and fishing gear, to time-area closures, depending on the nature and intensity of fisheries bycatch and the status of the populations affected.

Goal 1: Conduct and support research on seabird bycatch mitigation.

- Milestones
  - Ensure that Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program (BREP) and similar funding opportunities explicitly mention seabirds and focus on the most pressing bycatch concerns for seabirds. Consider using Council research priorities to help in this effort.
  - Re-evaluate efficacy of mitigation methods through a meta-analysis of published rates. (Published efficacy rates of individual methods may be dated, or apply only to individual projects/methods) – *note the overlap with Strategic Initiative 1*
  - Publish technical reports on the extent to which third wire systems are necessary for trawl vessels on the west coast and Alaska (and possibly other regions).
  - Support research on mitigation methods to reduce trawl-related seabird bycatch.
  - Conduct research to identify reasons for the increasing black-footed albatross bycatch.
  - Evaluate new bycatch mitigation tools and technologies.
  - Develop and maintain expertise for vessel-based research on seabird bycatch mitigation.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with National Bycatch Coordinator/BREP, Office of Sustainable Fisheries (OSF), relevant USFWS staff, NSP contacts from each regional & headquarters office & science centers, Protected Species Coordinators from FMCs

Goal 2: Engage, where appropriate, with industry, Councils, and other management bodies (e.g., RFMOs, State and Federal Agencies) on seabird bycatch mitigation measures, from research through implementation - *note the overlap with Strategic Initiative 3*.

- Milestones
  - Work with Councils to identify management priorities for seabird bycatch mitigation.

    - Share bycatch mitigation improvements with RFMOs through scientific working groups. (A good example is the Bycatch Working Group of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC).)
- POC: NSP Coordinator with Protected Species Coordinators from FMCs, Chair of the IATTC Bycatch Working Group, seabird-focused staff in NMFS Office of International Affairs and Seafood Inspection

<u>Goal 3: Collaborate with fishers to develop and support fisheries-based bycatch mitigation solutions.</u>

- Milestones
    - Allow for, encourage, and facilitate development of vessel-specific mitigation strategies (for vessels that are less effective at reducing bycatch).
    - Provide education materials/training to fishers regarding effective mitigation measures, including (where appropriate) proper use of gear, and effective fishing practices.
    - Continue to develop outreach and education materials pertaining to seabird bycatch mitigation (e.g., safe handling and release of bycaught seabirds, bycatch trends, bycatch regulations and required reporting, seabird species identification).
    - Continue to ensure seabird bycatch in research and commercial fisheries is addressed through appropriate authorities and existing mechanisms.
    - Promote opportunities for collaborative seabird bycatch mitigation research and mechanisms to facilitate this research (e.g., BREP, NOAA Fisheries' Cooperative Research program, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF)).
    - Update the U.S. National Plan of Action for Reducing the Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (pending approval from NOAA Fisheries' leadership) and expand to all gear types.
    - Ensure mitigation methods are being used appropriately. Once methods are part of regulation, ensure enforcement through cooperation with NOAA Fisheries Office of Law Enforcement (OLE), Coast Guard, and others as necessary.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with NOAA Fisheries regional & headquarters offices and science center contacts for seabirds

Strategic Initiative 3: Strengthen Key Partnerships

The NSP's interests in seabirds are shared with many other entities, including other NOAA Line Offices, other Federal agencies, Councils, non-governmental organizations, multilateral organizations, and other countries. All may have shared needs and priorities or carry out similar activities, even when responding to different statutes. Coordination and collaboration allows for leveraging of increasingly constrained resources, avoiding duplication, and enhancing communication and understanding.

Goal 1: Strengthen partnerships with other federal agencies (e.g., USFWS, BOEM, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)).

- Milestones
  - Renew the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between NOAA Fisheries and USFWS, per E.O. 13186 Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds (pending leadership approvals).
  - Establish regional USFWS POCs for Endangered Species Act consultations.
  - Revisit/Establish (where necessary) regional USFWS POCs for National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) assessments.
  - Establish an Interagency Seabird Working Group, to meet annually (concurrently with annual meetings of the Pacific Seabird Group).
  - Identify common needs/projects that can benefit from joint involvement (e.g., colony catalogues, seabird surveys, seabird data groups, reporting of legbands and other tags).
  - Produce annual reports of activities & accomplishments to brief agency leadership.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with relevant contacts from NOAA Office of General Counsel, USFWS, BOEM

Goal 2: Strengthen partnerships with Councils.

- Milestones
  - Identify Council-specific POCs for seabird issues.
  - Provide a written annual national report, with an offer to provide a summary in person, to all eight Councils containing: seabird bycatch summaries, emerging issues (e.g., anticipated changes or additions to regulations, identification of fisheries with high seabird bycatch), and information specific to particular regions that are developed in collaboration with seabird POCs from FMCs.
  - Request “MSA Research Priorities” (updates required every 5 years under the Magnuson-Stevens Act) document from each of the eight Councils and disseminate to regional seabird contacts.
  - Invite Council representatives to NSP quarterly calls (as appropriate; annually if not more frequently).
  - Share national-level issues at Council Coordination Committee meetings (attended by Council chairs, vice chairs, and executive directors).
- POC: NSP Coordinator with BREP, Council Executive Directors/Deputy Directors (to identify appropriate FMC POCs),

Goal 3: Strengthen partnerships with Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs), multilateral agreements, and with other countries through bilateral relationships.

- Milestones
  - Coordinate with U.S. delegations to RFMO meetings to advance seabird bycatch-related measures (e.g., increasing observer coverage of fisheries where seabirds have bycatch risk, improving collection of bycatch data, calling for

analysis of bycatch data and implementation of mitigation measures, enhancing mitigation measures).
    - Keep NSP updated on seabird bycatch and related activities within each of the RFMOs and in the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR).
    - Continue partnership with the Parties to the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP) to advance exchange of information between NOAA Fisheries and other countries on seabird bycatch-related work, and bring attention to/raise the profile of the issue of seabird bycatch at RFMO meetings.
    - Suggest inclusion of seabirds on the agenda of bilateral fisheries policy dialogs with Canada, Chile, Russia, Taiwan, China, and others.
    - Contribute to, and participate in, seabird conservation-related global workshops, international conferences, and other activities of this type when they involve seabird science, conservation, management, and fishery interaction issues.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with seabird-focused staff in NMFS Office of International Affairs and Seafood Inspection

<u>Goal 4: Strengthen partnerships with other line offices within NOAA, universities, and non-governmental organizations.</u>

- Milestones
    - Conduct periodic meetings with existing and new potential partners, including National Marine Sanctuaries (National Ocean Service), universities, Sea Grant, American Bird Conservancy, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and Tribes.
    - Consider identifying many key partners initially, and subsequently narrowing the scope to those that are strategic and able to leverage implementation of activities under the strategic plan.
- POC: NSP Coordinator

<u>Goal 5: Clarify MSA's sections 316 (b) and (c) as they pertain to seabirds - *cross-cutting with Strategic Initiatives 1 and 2*.</u>

- Milestones
    - Develop guidance regarding the implementation of Sections 316(b) and (c).
- POC: NSP Coordinator with the NOAA Office of General Counsel Fisheries and Protected Resources Section

Strategic Initiative 4: Promote Seabirds in Advancing Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management (EBFM) and Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM)

In the context of NOAA Fisheries' broader mission of ocean stewardship, seabirds can play an important role. Seabirds are excellent indicators of ecosystem status. As highly migratory, near-apex predators, they integrate across trophic levels, space, and time, and are easily studied relative to other marine species. Important issues include prey requirements of seabirds at a large marine ecosystem scale; the relative importance of

direct and indirect top-down effects of seabirds and fisheries; how to better use seabirds as tools for ecosystem samplers and indicators; and the location of seabird "hotspots" of abundance and diversity and drivers that create them. Important datasets include recurrent at-sea surveys for abundance, distribution trends, and foraging hotspots, as well as colony monitoring, beached bird surveys, bycatch data, and necropsy data from bycaught birds (including information on demographics, diet, ocean plastics, and body condition). Many of these datasets already exist and can be further developed to provide crucial long-term ecological context for implementing EBFM/EBM. However, seabirds will not be used in EBFM/EBM until we are able to develop methodologies and strategic partnerships that will allow seabird data to be incorporated into management processes. This remains an important component of future goals and milestones.

Goal 1: Foster better understanding of regional EBFM/EBM and FMC processes by NSP members, in order to facilitate inclusion of seabirds in those processes.

- Milestones
  - Establish and maintain regular contact between regional NSP members, regional NOAA Fisheries' EBFM points of contact, and protected species Council representatives regarding seabirds in the context of EBFM/EBM.
  - Develop a gap analysis to explore next steps and opportunities for involving seabirds in EBFM/EBM processes and contexts.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with regional members of NSP, Protected Species Coordinators of Councils, regional EBFM POCs

Goal 2: Improve understanding of existing seabird data and how they can be used to better inform/be meaningful in the context of EBFM/EBM.

- Milestones
  - Document where, how, and when seabird data have been used in EBFM/EBM.
  - Establish and maintain communication between seabird data experts and ecosystem modelers/stock assessment scientists.
  - Establish communication between Ecosystem Status Report leads and seabird experts/NSP members.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with regional members of NSP, EBFM POCs

Goal 3: Encourage and support seabird research that advances EBFM/EBM.

- Milestones
  - Encourage analysis of seabird data that can advance EBFM/EBM (i.e., new indicators, Management Strategy Evaluation, risk analyses).
  - Encourage continuation of existing seabird monitoring and data collection efforts, internal and external to NOAA.
- POC: NSP Coordinator with regional members of NSP, EBFM POCs

Strategic Initiative 5: Elevate Awareness of and Support for the NSP

Although NOAA Fisheries plays an important role in the conservation of seabirds, its work with seabirds is often not well-recognized. The work conducted by NSP directly fulfills the directives of the NPOA and EO 13186; it is also directly relevant to ecosystem-based science, stock assessments and research surveys. These goals and milestones are designed to bring recognition to the program and the work conducted by its scientists and managers.

Goal 1: Continue to produce the NSP Annual Report.

- Milestones
  - Solicit Accomplishments from NSP members (December).
  - Prepare draft report for NSP member review (mid-January).
  - Finalize report and submit to the Office of Science and Technology for approval to distribute (early February).
  - Publish on NSP website and distribute electronically to NSP, NOAA Fisheries leadership, and critical partners.
- POC: NSP Coordinator

Goal 2: Present NSP research and management projects and emerging issues at relevant scientific and management meetings and outreach opportunities (to include the annual meeting of the Pacific Seabird Group, OneNOAA Science and Brown Bag Seminars, World Migratory Bird Day and World Seabird Day), as funding and time allow.

- Milestones
  - Select potential issues and presenters from NSP quarterly calls and accomplishments updates, and NOP-funded seabird projects.
  - Prepare annual poster of NSP status and updates for meeting of the Pacific Seabird Group.
  - Publicize presentations widely.
- POC: NSP Coordinator

Goal 3: Provide periodic briefings to NOAA Fisheries' Assistant Administrator, Science and Regulatory Boards, Protected Resources Board, and other NOAA Fisheries working groups and programs.

- POC: NSP Coordinator

Goal 4: Promote seabirds through inclusion in annual priorities memoranda, strategic science and management plans, and science center activity plans.

- POC: NSP Coordinator with regional NSP members

Goal 9: Maintain NSP Website.

- Milestones
  - Update NSP website when changes occur and notify NSP team via email of changes (as needed).
- POC: NSP Coordinator

Citations

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Appendices

1-Executive Order 13186

2-MOU between NMFS and USFWS as required by EO 13186

3-U.S. National Plan of Action-Seabirds

4-Memorandum on the Establishment of the NMFS National Seabird Coordinator (September 27, 2001)

5-Memorandum Formalizing the NMFS National Seabird Program (January 19, 2011)

6-Memorandum on the Appointment of new NMFS National Seabird Coordinator (November 2, 2015)

7-Memorandum on the Appointment of new NMFS National Seabird Coordinator (September 5, 2019)