Abstract
Steller sea lion (SSL) abundance has stabilized at a low level or is slightly increasing in most regions of Alaska and Russia except the western part of the Aleutian chain. SSL continue to decline in the Commander (CI) and Near Islands (Western Aleutian Islands). In late June-early July 2015 we surveyed SSL rookeries and haulouts in the Russian part of the Western Bering Sea (WBS), Eastern Kamchatka (EK) and CI. Survey methods were similar to previous years. Depending on location, topography of the site, and the number of SSL present, researchers photographed and counted animals from the main boat, small skiff, or from shore locations high above the SSL. SSL were counted by age and sex group using binoculars. Digital photographs were used whenever possible to confirm visual counts. Forty-four SSL sites are known in the survey area. We visited 34 (77%) sites on which SSL were present sometime in the last 20-25 years. SSL were found on 18 (53%) surveyed sites. In the WBS SSL were hauled out at four (33%) locations, and the non-pup count was 89. In CI SSL were present at six (60%) sites where we counted 490 non-pups. At EK SSL used 8 (67%) sites and non-pup number there was 526. Pups were found at only six sites, four in CI and two in EK. Throughout all three survey areas we counted 1,105 non-pups, 242 live pups, and 11 dead pups. No dead non-pups were seen. Compared with the previous survey in 2010, total non-pup abundance at trend sites slightly increased (6%) while the pup number decreased by 24% in both CI and EK. Non-pup trends were different in all three areas, increasing by 56% in the WBS and 10% in EK, but decreasing by 3% CI. The ten-year trend (2006-2015) was clearly negative in all three survey regions and for all SSL age and sex groups. The strong pup decline suggests that the negative abundance trend will continue in the near future. The large difference in pup and non-pup trends suggests that low natality is driving the decline.

Historically available counts of Steller sea lion in three Russian Far East regions:

Conclusions

- 34 sites where SSL were seen at least once during the last 20-25 years were surveyed in June 17 – July 2, 2015.
- SSL were present at 18 (53%) of surveyed sites.
- A total 1,105 non-pups, 242 live pups, and 11 dead pups were counted at all locations.
- SSL non-pup abundance is slightly increased (6%) but pup production severely decreased (-24%) compared with previous similar survey in 2010.
- Ten year trend in abundance for both non-pups and pups was negative, but rate of decline was different in different regions.
- The strong pup decline suggests that the negative abundance trend will continue in the near future.