ALASKA REGIONAL SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

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Mr. Chris Oliver
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910
transmitted by electronic mail

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Dear Mr. Oliver,

The Alaska Regional Scientific Review Group (AKSRG) held its annual meeting on 22-23 February 2017 at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) building in Anchorage, Alaska. Our agenda included review of 2016 draft marine mammal stock assessment reports (SARs), detailed orientation of new members to the role of the AKSRG, and research and policy updates from NMFS and USFWS staff on issues associated with the status and assessment of Alaska's marine mammal stocks. The following are major recommendations from our meeting:

Southeast Alaska Harbor Porpoise

Currently, the estimated fishery-related mortality for the Southeast Alaska harbor porpoise stock is close to its Potential Biological Removal (PBR) level. The AKSRG recommends NMFS prioritize defining the genetic structure of the Southeast Alaska harbor porpoise stock, a key to assessing stock abundance and the true impact of fishery-related mortality. Specifically, we encourage enhanced collection of genetic material from harbor porpoise throughout Southeast Alaska, including outer coast populations, via environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling and tissue sampling of stranded/bycatch porpoises.
The AKSRG also encourages NMFS to develop alternative means of monitoring harbor porpoise mortality in southeast Alaska and cooperate with coastal fishermen to reduce/mitigate fishery-related mortality.

North Pacific Right Whale

The North Pacific right whale is in danger of extinction; research on this population should be a NMFS priority. One AKSRG recommendation for reducing prohibitive survey costs is to use gliders to search for and locate right whale calls. When calls are detected, the glider can signal the survey ship or aircraft, allowing for efficient location of right whales for subsequent approach and observation to document and photo-ID the number of individuals, obtain biopsies to determine the sex of animals (at present the sampled population is highly skewed towards males), and deploy satellite tags to better understand habitat use and wintering locations.

Bowhead whale

There is a long and valuable time series of 12 abundance estimates for Western Arctic bowhead whales, starting in 1978. Current PBR is calculated from the 2011 abundance estimate only. Although the stock has been increasing steadily and is not in danger, performing population modeling and analysis of this time series would be valuable as it would provide rare information on large whale population dynamics (e.g., intrinsic growth rate, density-dependence) and would likely allow better estimation of historical abundance and carrying capacity. It would also allow for estimating recent abundance based on all the information contained in the data

rather than using only a single survey, and would increase confidence in the PBR. Short-term projections of this model would provide information on population trend and may reduce the need for frequent expensive surveys.

Pacific Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (PacMAPP)

At this meeting, NOAA staff briefed the AKSRG on planning efforts related to the upcoming Pacific Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (PacMAPP). These ship-based surveys will assess marine mammals and oceanographic conditions in several broad regions in the Pacific Ocean. The AKSRG wholeheartedly supports PacMMAP and dedicated shipboard surveys in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea that focus on estimating the abundance of all cetaceans, with priorities on harbor porpoise and North Pacific right whales.

As a group, the AKSRG appreciates the opportunity to review marine mammal stock assessments and assist NMFS in addressing the conservation concerns of specific AK marine mammal stocks. But perhaps of greater value to NMFS is our assessment of priorities for future research related to AK stocks, especially in times of reduced funding outlooks. Therefore, we appreciate your consideration of the above recommendations and will gladly discuss these them in greater detail, if desired.

Respectfully,

Kate Wynne, Chair
For the Alaska Scientific Review Group

cc: AKSRG members
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