UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Silver Spring, MD 20910

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Dear Dr. Kenney:

Thank you for your letter to Samuel Rauch, Acting Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, transmitting recommendations from the February 2017 meeting of the Atlantic Scientific Review Group (SRG). Your letter was forwarded to me because the Office of Protected Resources within NOAA Fisheries is responsible for national programs under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and leads NOAA Fisheries' coordination of the SRGs.

The SRG has made many valuable recommendations to help guide NOAA Fisheries' marine mammal science and management, which are addressed in the enclosure. I appreciate the continued service and contributions by members of the Atlantic SRG in providing advice and support to NOAA Fisheries in accordance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act. I look forward to our continued partnership to improve the science supporting the conservation of marine mammals.

Sincerely,

Donna S. Wieting

Donna S. Wieting
Director, Office of Protected Resources

Enclosure

cc: Samuel D. Rauch, III, Acting Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
Francisco Werner, Acting Director of Scientific Programs and Chief Science Advisor
Ned Cyr, Director, Office of Science and Technology

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Responses to Recommendations of the Atlantic Regional Scientific Review Group

(1) The SRG strongly encourages NOAA Fisheries to pursue, with all possible haste, strategies and technologies that promise to substantially reduce or eliminate entanglement risk—up to and including fixed-gear fishing methodologies that eliminate from the water column any ropes capable of entangling whales. In addition, the SRG recommends increased research to identify how and where entanglements are occurring.

The Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team (Team) advises NOAA Fisheries on strategies and technologies to reduce entanglements of North Atlantic right whales and other large whales in commercial fishing gear. The NOAA Fisheries Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office convened a Team meeting on April 25-27, 2017 in Providence, Rhode Island. The purpose of the meeting was to: 1) provide the Team with the latest information regarding right whale and humpback whale abundance; 2) provide detailed information surrounding entanglement events since 2014; 3) discuss recent research on gear modifications; 4) review a regulatory exemption request; and 5) discuss implications of recent right whale abundance findings and the need for future action. The results of the Team meeting will be shared with the Atlantic SRG at its 2018 meeting. We agree with the SRG that additional information is needed on how and where entanglements are occurring. We are continuing to work with our partners on this issue, and will consider this research need as we evaluate marine mammal research and conservation activities that can be conducted with available funding.

(2) The SRG strongly recommends: (a) increasing the level of observer coverage in northern Gulf of Mexico shrimp trawl fisheries to facilitate extrapolations to the entire fishery; (b) including observer programs for bay, sound, and estuary waters; and (c) geo-referencing takes of dolphins to facilitate assignment of mortality to specific dolphin stocks.

The Southeast Fisheries Science Center is working to improve spatial coverage of Gulf of Mexico shrimp fisheries. A small amount of funding was recently obtained to initiate observer coverage on components of the skimmer and otter trawl fisheries that operate within estuarine and nearshore coastal waters. With regard to recommendation (c), the observed takes of bottlenose dolphins and other protected species are "georeferenced," as detailed information on the position and operations of the vessel are recorded by the observer onboard. However, precise location information is not reported for the unobserved fishery effort. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center will continue to explore methods to gain greater detail on the spatial distribution of fishery effort to address identified information gaps related to protected species bycatch in shrimp fisheries.

(3) The SRG recommends NOAA Fisheries support mark-recapture analyses of the Gulf of Maine humpback whale photo-identification catalog maintained by Dr. Robbins at the Center for Coastal Studies, to estimate abundance and/or minimum number alive, population trends, survival and mortality rates, entanglement rates, and effectiveness of the Take Reduction Plan or other management measures.

NOAA Fisheries supports this initiative and will consider allocating funds to the Northeast Fisheries Science Center to support Gulf of Maine humpback whale photo-identification efforts dependent on availability of funds.

(4) The SRG recommends NOAA Fisheries undertake a dedicated research program of photo-identification, satellite-linked telemetry, and biopsy sampling to address uncertainties in the stock structure of coastal bottlenose dolphins along the U.S. Atlantic coast. These efforts should be collaborative with those of other research programs working in this area. Furthermore, relevant data from this program and previous NOAA research efforts in this area (including prior photo-identification and biopsy surveys) should be contributed to the Mid-Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin Catalog.

NOAA Fisheries agrees that additional research is required on the stock structure of coastal bottlenose dolphins along the U.S. Atlantic coast and that collaborations with established non-NOAA Fisheries researchers will be important to meet this need. NOAA Fisheries will consider this research need as we evaluate marine mammal research and conservation activities that can be conducted with available funding.

(5) The SRG recommends NOAA Fisheries conduct trend analyses with available data, prioritizing analyses for species that are particularly data-rich or where there are critical management issues. The SRG recognizes that, given existing personnel resources, it may be difficult to perform these new analyses without compromising planned and ongoing work. Thus, the SRG recommends NOAA Fisheries provide the personnel resources required for these analyses.

The Southeast and Northeast Fisheries Science Centers are actively working to improve population trend assessments where there are sufficient data available to support these analyses. As presented to the Atlantic SRG at the 2017 meeting, an analysis of population trend was completed for Atlantic coastal bottlenose dolphin stocks. Recent surveys and spatial models conducted as part of the Atlantic Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species program should allow improved trend analysis for Western North Atlantic stocks. In the Gulf of Mexico, many stocks remain data-deficient to support trend analyses; however, we anticipate that data collected during the proposed Gulf of Mexico Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (GoMMAPPS) program will help to address some of these data gaps. Personnel support associated with GoMMAPPS will likely allow progress toward this goal, for Gulf of Mexico oceanic and continental shelf stocks, without compromising other efforts.

(6) The SRG recommends that NOAA Fisheries explore how to provide more formal feedback to the SRG concerning substantive concerns raised in the SRG's review of the SARs, when such concerns were not explicitly incorporated into, or addressed by, revised SARs.

The Southeast and Northeast Fisheries Science Centers have discussed providing additional, more formal feedback to the Atlantic SRG. We propose that we compile the SRG recommendations and substantive comments from each SAR into a document table and provide our responses to each recommendation/comment. We would annually send this document to the SRG to provide details on how we addressed each recommendation. This will provide a record

of the annual comments and responses that can be referred to if future questions arise.

(7) *The SRG appreciates NOAA Fisheries' initial effort at responding to its 2016 recommendation to "prepare a list of stocks of potential concern, due to their small size or lack of information, for an ASRG review with regards to prioritizing research" by providing a list of the 57 Gulf and southeastern U.S. stocks with estimated abundances below 500. The SRG recommends that northeastern U.S. stocks meeting the same criterion be added to the list, in addition to any factors that might facilitate prioritization. The SRG also offers its services to work with NOAA Fisheries staff between meetings on setting research priorities.*

Northeast Fisheries Science Center staff will work with Southeast Fisheries Science Center staff to identify any small or threatened stocks in the Northeast and will provide a complete list of all such stocks to the Atlantic SRG ahead of its next meeting. We appreciate and will consider the SRG's offer to assist in setting research priorities.

(8) *The SRG appreciates the efforts by the authors and editors of the SARs to fulfill the recommendations under GAMMS III to address uncertainty in the reports. Following the discussion at the meeting about the need for substantial streamlining of the additions to the SARs and scaling back to addressing only "key" uncertainties, the SRG is confident that the staff will be up to the task. SRG members have each made their own editorial suggestions on the SARs they reviewed. SRG members are also offering their collective service for additional review as the 2017 SARs move through the process.*

NOAA Fisheries appreciates the SRG's thorough review of the SARs and continued support of our efforts.