ALASKA, ATLANTIC, AND PACIFIC SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUPS

Regional Advisory Groups to the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Lloyd Lowry
Chair, Alaska Scientific Review Group

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Eileen Sobeck
Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1335 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dan Ashe, Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 "C" Street, NW Room 3331
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Ms. Sobeck and Mr. Ashe,

We would like to provide you with the recommendations from the recent joint meeting of the Alaska, Atlantic, and Pacific Scientific Review Groups held 23-24 February 2016 in Seattle, Washington.

The Alaska, Atlantic, and Pacific SRGs commend the efforts by the NMFS Science Centers to develop innovative methods to remedy long-time problems in dealing with rare takes, negative biases in mortality estimates, and abundance estimation. The SRGs encourage the NMFS Science Centers to continue these and other efforts to develop methods, and to expand and adapt those methods to other regions and other stocks. The SRGs provide the following recommendations to NMFS and the USFWS:

1. The Alaska, Atlantic, and Pacific SRGs commend the efforts by the NMFS Climate Vulnerability Project to estimate the effects of climate change on marine mammals and offer their individual and collective expertise to assist in this effort. The SRGs stress the critical value of establishing baselines from which to measure the effects of climate change and climate variability. The SRGs recommend that NMFS and USFWS: a) collaborate on the Climate Vulnerability Project; b) establish and maintain baselines for abundance, status, vital rates (particularly reproductive rates), prey abundance, habitat-use patterns, and distributional range; and c) identify those species that may be less resilient to climate change (and therefore in need of greater protection) and those that may benefit by climate change.

2. When observer programs are too costly or logistically difficult to reliably monitor marine mammal mortality by a fishery, alternative methods should be used for determining where, when, and approximately how many marine mammals are being seriously injured or killed.

3. If there are known interactions between marine mammals and fisheries resulting in serious injury or mortality, then safe and appropriate mitigation measures should be implemented, even in the absence of abundance and mortality data, a strategic stock determination, and take reduction team formation.

4. The USFWS should produce updated Stock Assessment Reports annually for strategic stocks and triennially for other stocks under its jurisdiction. These SARs should incorporate the most recent peer-reviewed information and best science available on abundance, mortality, trends, management actions taken and other information as required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

5. The SRGs recommend that NMFS implement a multi-year allocation of ship time for marine mammal surveys and increase the priority and operational funding for those surveys. The surveys are necessary to obtain the abundance estimates required to calculate PBR and thus enable fisheries to meet the standards required by the MMPA. The failure to meet those requirements may place an undue burden on those fisheries and the lack of data can place marine mammal populations at risk.

6. Estimated levels of human-caused mortality and serious injury suffer from negative biases due to incomplete detection and recovery of carcasses. A correction factor for this mortality has been derived for some coastal delphinids and is being applied to address this negative bias. We recommend research on cryptic mortality be done on a regional basis to establish such correction factors and incorporate them into stock assessment reports as appropriate.

7. The 2016 stock assessment guidelines state that PBRs must be calculated and reported in the SARs where possible, even for species that are declining and listed as endangered. Statements should be included in the summary table and text cautioning that no take can be sustainable for an endangered population that is declining.

The SRGs compliment the NMFS and USFWS staffs for their participation in the meeting, excellent presentations, outstanding research, and support of the SRG. In particular, the SRGs commend Van Helker and the local staff of the Marine Mammal Laboratory for so capably handling the logistics for this meeting.

Sincerely,

Lloyd Lowry Chair, Alaska Scientific Review Group
Randall Wells Acting Chair, Atlantic Scientific Review Group
Michael Scott Chair, Pacific Scientific Review Group

cc: Shannon Bettridge F/PR