



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

DEC 5 2007

Michael Scott, Ph.D.  
Chair, Pacific Scientific Review Group  
Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission  
c/o Scripps Institute of Oceanography  
La Jolla, California 92037

Dear Dr. Scott:

Thank you for your letter to the Assistant Administrator for Fisheries transmitting recommendations from the November 2006 meeting of the Pacific Scientific Review Group. Your letter was forwarded to my office for response because the Office of Protected Resources is responsible for national coordination of marine mammal research and conservation activities.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is aware the marine mammal programs in the Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) and the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) have focused primarily on Hawaiian monk seals. NMFS is attempting to expand marine mammal research and programs more broadly throughout the region; however, additional resources must be obtained through the President's budget request for the entire Federal government. Consequently, increases to regional and national marine mammal programs must be made within the constraints of Administration and Congressional priorities. As my office and PIFSC continue to work in formulation of the annual budget request, PIFSC has obtained funds from the Marine Mammal Commission and is seeking external grants to continue the efforts they have begun. The center is also establishing partnerships to bring resources, including additional expertise, into the program.

PIRO is working to expand the stranding program in the Western Pacific. Recently, PIRO assisted groups from Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in successfully competing for a Prescott Grant, which will fund the initial development of cetacean stranding response capability on those islands. PIRO, and our Hawaii based stranding response groups, will work closely with them in this development process.

PIRO is also working with the State of Hawaii to reduce environmental impacts of near-shore fishing within the main Hawaiian Islands. The State recently restricted the use of lay nets, which should reduce mortality of monk seals and other living marine resources near shore. However, the recent death of an additional monk seal in a gill net highlights the need for continued emphasis on this issue. PIRO recently requested the State of Hawaii temporarily prohibit gill net use in an area near a recently weaned pup and added a recreational fishing representative to the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team to foster a dialog and seek solutions to the fishery interaction problem.

Assessment of monk seals within the main Hawaiian Islands remains an unmet priority. Understanding the dynamics of seals on Niihau is, indeed, important because a large number of monk seals inhabit the island. In this regard, PIRO recently worked with partnering volunteer organizations on a 1-day, all-island count of monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands that included an aerial count of seals on Niihau. Research is also necessary on the other main Hawaiian Islands because interactions with human activities are increasing.

NMFS' Southwest Regional Office convened the Pacific Offshore Cetacean Take Reduction Team in April 2007. The team reviewed the latest information on marine mammal takes in the California/Oregon drift gillnet fishery and noted that the gear restrictions in the plan are effectively reducing takes, particularly of beaked whales. Species that are still taken at levels exceeding the insignificance threshold and/or near the potential biological removal level include the northern right-whale dolphin, the long-beaked common dolphin, and the short-finned pilot whale. Due to concerns about incidental takes of marine mammal stocks in other Category I and II fisheries off California, the team recommended expanding the scope of the team to include two other gillnet fisheries, the "California yellowtail, barracuda and white seabass drift gillnet fishery" and the "California angel shark/halibut and other species set gillnet fishery." NMFS is planning to provide educational and outreach materials to participants in these fisheries, particularly information on the efficacy of pingers, and will add a representative from each fishery to the team. The team also made recommendations on improving enforcement to ensure compliance with plan regulations and requested to meet again in April 2008.

NMFS is aware of the status of large whales in the Pacific. We have established a schedule to complete 5-year reviews as required by the Endangered Species Act. NMFS would follow these 5-year reviews with more formal status reviews that would be necessary to alter the whales' status under the law.

Studies of the stock structure of harbor porpoise, false killer whales, and other cetaceans along the west coast and throughout the Pacific remain important. Studies will be continued and expanded as resources allow.

I appreciate your continued service to the Nation as members of Scientific Review Groups and look forward to working with you in the conservation of marine mammals and other living marine resources.

Sincerely,



for James H. Lecky  
Director  
Office of Protected Resources

bcc: F/PR(R), F/CU, F/SWC-Karin Forney, F/SWR-Tina Fahy, F/PIC-Bud Antonelis, F/PIR-Cris Yates, PR2-Eagle  
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