



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

OCT 24 2012

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

Dear Dr. Scott:

Thank you for your recommendations from the November 2011 meeting of the Pacific Scientific Review Group (SRG). The SRG made a number of valuable comments and recommendations to help guide science in NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

The SRG recommendation for NMFS to conduct harbor porpoise assessment surveys in Oregon and Washington is particularly important given that abundance estimates for these animals are greater than eight years old. This year, NMFS' Southwest Fisheries Science Center is planning to analyze data from 2010/2011 aerial surveys that were conducted for leatherback sea turtles to try to estimate harbor porpoise abundance in waters offshore of Washington and Oregon.

The SRG also recommends that new surveys be conducted for harbor seal stocks in Oregon and Washington. NMFS' Northwest Regional Office and the U.S. Navy have provided funds for a NMFS/Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife collaborative survey for harbor seals in the inland waters of Washington to be completed by February 2014. At this point, funding is not available to conduct harbor seal abundance surveys in Oregon.

NMFS agrees with the SRG's statement that there is a need to study the effect of Hawaii's near-shore fisheries on marine mammals, and we continue to work cooperatively with the State of Hawaii and other partners to assess and address marine mammal interactions in state-managed fisheries. NMFS currently works with the State of Hawaii through an Endangered Species Act (ESA) Section 6 cooperative agreement, and corresponding Species Recovery Grant funding, to document and mitigate near-shore fishery interactions with Hawaiian monk seals and sea turtles. The State is also developing a pilot reporting and monitoring system for interactions, and assessing current and future regulatory and non-regulatory alternatives for fishery take reduction and monitoring. Additionally, NMFS' Pacific Islands Regional Office and Fisheries Science Center coordinate with the State to provide education and outreach to Hawaii's fishermen about protected species, which helps improve relationships and build trust with Hawaii's sport and commercial fishing sectors. Should NMFS list Hawaiian insular false killer whales under the ESA, there is the potential to expand the scope of Hawaii's ESA Section 6 cooperative agreement to include these animals.

Your letter encourages NMFS to use emerging technologies to gather marine mammal acoustic data. The Pacific Islands and Southwest Fisheries Science Centers have recently conducted

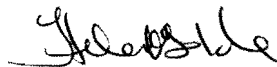


research using acoustic gliders and buoy-mounted acoustic devices to detect marine mammals. In addition, the Science Centers are continuing to pursue funding opportunities to expand cetacean assessment capabilities to include passive acoustic data, such as detections from autonomous gliders, profiles, and stationary sensors.

Regarding the SRG recommendation that NMFS work with the U.S. Navy in Hawaii area, NMFS has recently received a request from Navy for an MMPA incidental take authorization that would cover Phase 2 of their activities in Hawaii and Southern California. They are currently operating in Hawaii under existing MMPA regulations (effective 2009), and the new proposed regulations, if issued, would be effective from January 2014 to January 2019. The MMPA requires that when issuing an authorization, NMFS work closely with the applicant to determine ways of reducing impacts to marine mammals, while considering the practicality of any mitigation we may require. We will explicitly consider the SRG recommendation as we work with Navy to identify appropriate mitigation measures for the new application we are currently processing.

NMFS appreciates the SRG's review of the agency's research planning and will provide the schedule of shipboard marine mammal surveys to you to further facilitate this review.

Sincerely,



Helen M. Golde
Acting Director
Office of Protected Resources

PACIFIC SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

A Regional Advisory Group to the National Marine Fisheries Service

August 3, 2012

Eric C. Schwaab
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1335 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dear Dr. Schwaab,

We would like to provide you with the minutes and recommendations from the most recent meeting of the Pacific Scientific Review Group held 7-9 November 2011.

The SRG understands the budgetary constraints that the NMFS is under, but we have strong concerns about the ability of NMFS to conduct surveys at timely intervals to manage marine mammal populations. The PBR management scheme requires regular estimates of abundance to function properly and many of our recommendations focus on the need for more-current surveys and abundance estimates. The SRG is particularly concerned about the lack of abundance estimates for harbor seals and harbor porpoises off Washington and Oregon and the recent cancellation of the ORCAWALE surveys which is the main source of abundance information for most West Coast cetacean stocks.

Once again, the SRG compliments your NMFS staff for their excellent presentations, outstanding research, and support of the SRG.

Sincerely,



Michael Scott
Chairman, Pacific Scientific Review Group

cc: Shannon Bettridge

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RESEARCH AND MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS
Pacific Scientific Review Group – 7-9 November, 2011

The SRG recommends that the NMFS cooperate with the State of Hawaii to collect more information about Hawaiian near-shore fisheries. Published observations have documented small-scale fishery takes of marine mammals, but it still must be determined whether these fishery takes are significant and how they can be reduced or avoided. Additional partners (such as sport and commercial fishing organizations and environmental groups) could also help explore ways that hook-and-line fishing gear and trolling practices can be modified to reduce marine mammal takes.

The SRG recommends that NOAA include the need for acoustic detections of marine mammals in the design and deployment of buoys and ocean gliders. The recent increase in the use of this technology by NOAA and NOAA partners is creating potential opportunities to gather much needed acoustic signals from marine mammals.

The SRG recommends that NMFS work with the U.S. Navy to establish the area off the NW side of the Island of Hawaii and the Alanuihaha Channel as an exclusion area for mid-frequency sonar use. This area appears to include the range of a resident group of melon-headed whales as well as those of resident populations of Cuvier's and Blainville's beaked whales. All three of these species are known to be sensitive to naval mid-frequency sonar.

The SRG recommends that harbor porpoise assessment surveys be conducted off Oregon and Washington and in Washington inland waters in light of 1) the long interval since the last surveys (2002 for the outer coast, 2002-2003 for inland waters), 2) the Unusual Mortality Event that occurred in this region since the last surveys, and 3) the evidence for recent ecosystem changes and changes in distribution of harbor porpoise into Puget Sound. This is particularly important given that PBRs can no longer be calculated because abundance estimates are greater than 8 years old.

The SRG recommends that new surveys be conducted for harbor seal stocks in Oregon and Washington. There are no current abundance estimates, and thus no PBRs, for these stocks.

The SRG recommends that a schedule of shipboard marine mammal surveys, with cost estimates, be provided to aid in the SRG's review of NMFS research planning.