



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

THE DIRECTOR

FEE 11 2015

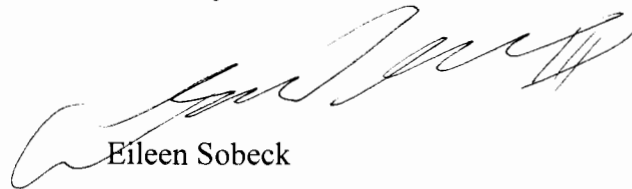
Michael Scott, Ph.D.
Chair, Pacific Scientific Review Group
Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission
c/o Scripps Institution of Oceanography
La Jolla, CA 92037

Dear Dr. Scott:

Thank you for your letter providing the minutes and recommendations from the April 2014 meeting of the Pacific Scientific Review Group (SRG). The SRG made several valuable comments and recommendations to help guide marine mammal science in NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), which are addressed in the enclosure.

I appreciate the continued service and contributions of the members of the Pacific SRG in providing advice to NMFS in accordance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Guidelines for Assessing Marine Mammal Stocks. I look forward to your future recommendations to improve the science supporting the conservation of marine mammals.

Sincerely,



Eileen Sobeck

Enclosure



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THE ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR
FOR FISHERIES



Responses to 2014 Recommendations of the Pacific Regional Scientific Review Group

1. The Scientific Review Group (SRG) recommends that NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) collaborate with the State of Hawaii to review information on fisheries that operate in Hawaiian nearshore waters and to review depredation of fish catches by cetaceans.

NMFS' Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) continues to evaluate State of Hawaii fisheries effort data to better understand and characterize the fisheries. The Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) is planning to use input from the State of Hawaii to better describe the fisheries for the 2016 List of Fisheries, and new descriptions appear in the 2013 SAR fishery description appendix.

PIFSC can use data collected by the State to evaluate catch amount, seasonality, location of fishing activities, and variation in these according to State-defined gear configurations. We currently do not have the capacity to systematically increase data collection efforts beyond the State's required reporting system, and as such, information about regional variations in gear type may only be evaluated through targeted interviews with fishermen. PIFSC will aim to present additional information on the geographic and seasonal distribution of the most common State fisheries (various types of troll and handline) during the next Pacific SRG meeting. Assessment of regional variation in gear will take more time and will require collaboration with the State. PIFSC and PIRO will work with the State to see what additional information may already be available, and examine how best regional variation may be evaluated in the future.

The collaborative work proposed by the State of Hawaii was not funded in FY2014. We expect the State will resubmit an Endangered Species Act Section 6 proposal in FY2015 based on the review received in 2014.

Regarding depredation of fish catches by cetaceans, The State's commercial fishing reporting forms collect some information on depredation but not marine mammal interactions (i.e., hooking and entanglement). As far as we know, the State is not planning to revise the data collection form in the near future. PIFSC will evaluate what information is available on depredation based on reporting on State required logbook forms for the next SRG meeting. In addition, PIFSC is embarking on survey of troll fishermen to better understand their experience with marine mammal interactions during fishing activities.

2. The SRG recommends that harbor porpoise assessment surveys be conducted in Washington inland waters in light of the long interval since the last surveys, the evidence

of recent changes ecosystem and in distribution of harbor porpoise in Puget Sound, and the increased harbor porpoise strandings in these waters in 2012.

NMFS appreciates the SRG recommendation to conduct harbor porpoise assessment surveys in Washington inland waters, and is working with the U.S. Navy to conduct surveys in this area. The Navy recently completed a survey of the all the basins of Puget Sound proper; however, the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the San Juan Islands were not included in the survey. The contractor for the Navy who conducted the work is currently developing a cost estimate to survey the San Juan Islands and Canadian waters, which NMFS will consider when available. NMFS is hopeful that the surveys can be conducted in the near future.

3. The SRG recommends that surveys be completed for harbor seal stocks in Oregon and Washington, as there are no current abundance estimates or PBRs for these stocks.

NMFS recognizes that the abundance estimates for these stocks are out of date, and has taken steps to collect the data needed to update those estimates. During 2014, NMFS funded Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to conduct harbor seal surveys of the inland waters of Washington; those surveys were completed. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife completed harbor seal surveys of the Washington coast and estuaries during 2014 and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife conducted surveys of harbor seals on the coast of Oregon. We anticipate that data from these surveys will be adequate for an assessment of the Washington and Oregon harbor seal populations, and that abundance estimates will be included in the stock assessment reports as soon as the analyzed data are available.

4. The SRG recommends that NMFS rapidly develop a multi-year allocation of ship time for marine mammal surveys and increase the priority and funding for these surveys necessary to obtain abundance estimates required to calculate PBR and thus enable fisheries to meet the standards required by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

NMFS shares the SRG's interest in extended and improved abundance estimates for Pacific marine mammal stocks, and we continue to explore all avenues to regularly schedule marine mammal cruises. The agency is exploring options to use NOAA and charter/contract non-NOAA vessels for this purpose, as well as leveraging and expanding our research collaboration with other Federal partners to conduct multispecies and ecosystem assessment surveys in U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) regions and the eastern tropical Pacific (ETP). The agency is exploring a rotating schedule of cruises following regular trackline grids at a spatial resolution of 60 nautical miles (with the exception of the ETP, which would follow its current protocol). Depending on available funding and external collaboration, this would potentially allow the continental EEZs to be surveyed twice every five years, and the oceanic EEZs and ETP every six years. We appreciate the SRG's continued interest in this effort.

5. The SRG recommends that NMFS rapidly cut through bureaucratic obstacles that hinder the collection of biological samples from marine mammals incidentally killed during NOAA research activities.

NMFS is undertaking a national effort to ensure that Science Center fisheries research is in compliance with U.S. environmental statutes in a consistent, transparent, and efficient manner. Each Science Center will conduct an analysis under the National Environment Policy Act (NEPA), request Incidental Take Authorizations under the MMPA from the Office of Protected Resources, and engage in consultation with Regional Offices under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. NMFS goes through a similar process to authorize takes by industry and other Federal Agencies (such as the Navy).

The agency expects to publish all NEPA documents for public comment by winter 2015, and the full process should be complete by 2016-2017, subject to regulatory clearance requirements and processing times. Until each Science Center completes this process, sampling of any incidentally caught marine mammal is prohibited. This is a high priority action for the agency.

6. The SRG recommends continued funding for studies of movements and genetics of false killer whales and other cetaceans around Hawaii and in the Central Pacific to better understand stock structure.

PIFSC has received and provided to outside partners modest funding for studies of movements and genetics of false killer whales and other cetaceans around Hawaii and in the central Pacific. In 2014, PIFSC worked with the U.S. Navy to fund analysis of genetic samples collected in Mariana Islands from spinner, spotted, and bottlenose dolphins, and melon-headed, false killer, short-finned pilot, and sperm whales in the Marianas. Preliminary findings from many of those species were presented at the 2014 Pacific SRG meeting and can also be found in a recently published Technical Memo from SWFSC (Martien et al. 2014. Genetic diversity and population structure in four species of cetacean around the Mariana Islands. NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFSC-536). PIFSC also initiated a pilot study for surveys off windward Molokai in August 2014 and is evaluating how best to continue that work. Satellite telemetry and photo-ID studies are underway at PIFSC or funded by PIFSC for several cetacean species in Hawaii and the Mariana Islands.