

PACIFIC SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

A Regional Advisory Group to the National Marine Fisheries Service

April 26, 2016

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

Dear Ms. Sobeck,

Please find enclosed the minutes and recommendations from the meeting of the Pacific Scientific Review Group held 10-12 March 2015.

The SRG has recommended that full funding be reinstated for nationwide mammal stranding networks administered by NOAA (the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program). Stranding network investigations document mortality of marine mammals and identify causes of such mortality, including such things as fishery interactions, human-generated noise, disease, harmful algal blooms, and shifts in survival and distribution that may portend changes in ocean ecosystems from large-scale episodic events (*e.g.*, El Niños) as well as systematic trends over longer time periods (*e.g.*, climate change). In the SRG's view, partial funding for this program is helpful but not sufficient to provide this kind of information, which is essential for a timely and accurate understanding of ocean health and trends therein. No other program provides such a comprehensive basis for assessing human effects on marine mammals and their ecosystems. Therefore, the SRG recommends that the NMFS fully restore funding and support for this vital program.

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

Research and management recommendations
Pacific Scientific Review Group Meeting, 10-12 March 2015

The SRG recommends that the NMFS collaborate with the State of Hawaii to produce two reviews that can aid in future management:

- 1) Expand upon the information presented at the SRG meeting and the subsequent preliminary studies on the fisheries that operate in Hawaiian nearshore waters (such as the troll, handline, shortline, and other fisheries). In addition to the information that is currently collected from fishermen through self-reports, data should be collected on catch amounts, season, location, and types of gear used, including regional variations in gear used. The SRG supports the collaborative research proposed by the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, with its emphasis on scientific research and outreach to the fishing community and public.

- 2) Depredation of fish catches by cetaceans is recognized as a serious problem for both fishermen and cetaceans in Hawai'i. To better understand the dimensions and dynamics of this cetacean-fishery interaction, a review and problem analysis for each of the applicable fisheries could provide both a historical perspective and a current assessment of the problem.

The SRG recommends that NMFS procure and maintain sufficient resources to continue to operate the NWHI monk seal field camps and maintain rescue, rehabilitation, and survivorship-enhancement programs throughout the Hawaiian Archipelago. A recent publication (Harting et al. 2014) shows that about a third of the Hawaiian monk seal population is alive only because of the survival-enhancement efforts of NMFS and its collaborators. The field camps in the NWHI not only allow monitoring status of these rookeries and research, but play a critical part in survivorship-enhancement efforts, from rescuing sick or malnourished pups, removing potentially entangling net debris from the islands, translocating pups to areas where survivorship probabilities are greater, and mitigating mortality from male seal aggression, Galapagos shark predation and entrapment.

The SRG recommends that NMFS develop a multi-year allocation of ship time for marine mammal surveys and increase the priority and funding for these surveys necessary to obtain the abundance estimates required to calculate PBR and thus enable fisheries to meet the standards required by the MMPA. A West Coast Survey was completed that provided new abundance estimates but a national survey plan is needed to allocate enough shiptime to obtain new abundance estimates for marine mammal populations.

There is currently marine mammal bycatch during trawls by NOAA research vessels, but samples and carcasses cannot be collected because there is no NOAA permit issued to do so. The SRG recommends that NMFS rapidly cut through the bureaucratic obstacles that hinder the collection of biological samples from the marine mammals incidentally killed during NOAA research activities.

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. Much has been learned from these studies, but more information is required; for example, movement data from all the social clusters of false killer whales around the Hawaiian Islands are needed to understand stock structure, ecology, distribution, and fishery interactions.

The SRG recommends that full funding be reinstated for nationwide mammal stranding networks administered by NOAA (the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program). Nationwide, marine mammal stranding response networks are run primarily through non-profits and other non-government entities and coordinated through NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. These networks perform an array of important functions as they respond to an average of more than 5,000 marine mammal strandings each year. Indeed, the fundamental work of the nation's stranding networks plays a vital role in enabling NMFS to meet its Congressional mandate by supporting the "*stewardship of living marine resources through science-based conservation and management and the promotion of healthy ecosystems*". Stranding network investigations are necessary for a timely and accurate understanding of ocean health and to document mortality of marine mammals, which is a vital component of the Stock Assessment Reports. Without sufficient federal support, much of this vital work will cease.