



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

MAY 14 2009

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 transmitting minutes and recommendations from the November 2008 meeting of the Pacific Scientific Review Group (SRG).

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is aware of the many gaps in the information necessary to inform conservation decisions throughout the Pacific region, as well as in Alaska waters and the Atlantic Ocean (including the Gulf of Mexico). NMFS agrees that many of the information gaps identified by the SRG include the high-priority needs in the Pacific Ocean. Similarly, NMFS scientists and managers, in consultation with the Alaska and Atlantic SRGs, have identified additional critical needs in the Alaska and Atlantic regions. NMFS continues to focus additional support, when it becomes available, toward these competing priorities.

The abundance estimates for stocks of marine mammals within the Hawaiian Exclusive Economic Zone will soon be outdated and no longer reliable for use in conservation decisions (e.g., calculating Potential Biological Removal levels). Scientists from the Southwest and Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Centers were originally planning to conduct a survey in 2010 to update the abundance estimates. However, a survey originally planned for 2009 in the Eastern Tropical Pacific (ETP) Ocean was delayed until 2010 due to loss from active use of the *David Starr Jordan*. Because the ETP survey will require necessary resources at the Southwest Fisheries Science Center, the Hawaii survey will need to be delayed until at least 2011.

I agree that focused studies on deep diving cetaceans, such as beaked whales, may produce some information to support conservation decisions. Accordingly, NMFS will continue to support these studies, we hope in collaboration with other federal agencies, to the extent that our limited funds allow.

NMFS shares your concerns about the lack of baseline information on marine mammal stocks occupying the waters around Guam and the Pacific Island territories. Similarly, NMFS acknowledges there is little baseline information on stocks of ice-breeding seals in the Arctic, which are at risk from loss of sea ice, and that many other situations in which human activity could affect marine mammals are not well studied.

Scientists from the Southwest and Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Centers are working together to evaluate existing information to determine whether mortality and serious injury attributed to

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fisheries can be allocated between the insular and pelagic stocks of false killer whales in Hawaii. The Pacific Islands Region is contacting industry representatives to obtain any existing information on the near-shore short-line fishery that may be interacting with insular false killer whales and other cetaceans. Any new information will be incorporated into future stock assessment reports. These scientists are also evaluating available information to determine which stocks of marine mammals occupying waters surrounding U.S. territories in the Pacific could be described in stock assessment reports.


The Southwest Fisheries Science Center and the Southwest Regional Office continue to collaborate with the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary to support monitoring of the Santa Barbara Channel to detect concentrations of blue whales or other large whales. Following the unusual number of ship strikes in that area in 2007, NMFS, the Sanctuary, the U.S. Coast Guard, and shipping representatives from Long Beach and Los Angeles, California, agreed to non-regulatory measures to reduce ship strikes in the future, and several measures were implemented in 2008. These measures remain ready for use in the future when monitoring efforts indicate that whales are concentrating in the shipping channel.

Additional surveys for harbor porpoise in Washington and Oregon are not likely before 2011. Scientists from the Alaska and Southwest Fishery Science Centers are working on a tentative plan for coast-wide surveys for harbor porpoise.

NMFS scientists and managers have prepared a system to evaluate the levels of certainty for key elements for assessing the status of marine mammals and sea turtles. This system is summarized within a stock assessment improvement plan (Table 1, p. 14), which also contains a listing of all marine mammal stocks, by region, showing the levels of certainty for each of the key elements in the process (Appendix Table 3, p. 75). These tables were prepared for publication in 2004 and have been updated since. The plan is available online at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/improvement_plan.pdf.

I appreciate your many contributions to the conservation of marine mammals and other living marine resources, and look forward to continuing a productive relationship with the regional SRGs.

Sincerely,



James W. Balsiger, Ph.D.
Acting Assistant Administrator
for Fisheries