

False Killer Whale

Take Reduction Process Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is a false killer whale?

A: The false killer whale (*Pseudorca crassidens*) is a member of the oceanic dolphin family. False killer whales are found worldwide, mainly in tropical and warm-temperate waters. Three stocks of false killer whales have been identified in the central Pacific – the Hawaii Pelagic, Hawaii Insular, and Palmyra Atoll Stocks. False killer whales feed on tuna and other commercially-important pelagic fish species.

Q: What is take?

A: The Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) defines “take” as “to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal.” The MMPA prohibits take of marine mammals. Serious injuries and mortalities are considered take.

Q: What is the problem?

A: During long-line fishing operations, false killer whales become hooked or entangled in fishing gear and, as a result, may become seriously injured or killed. Currently, these takes are occurring at a level that is unsustainable for the Hawaii Pelagic Stock. In response, the MMPA requires the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to convene a Take Reduction Team (TRT) to draft a plan for reducing serious injuries and mortalities of false killer whales that occur incidental to commercial fishing activities.

Q: How can the take of a few animals per year be unsustainable?

A: A mortality or serious injury of more than a few false killer whales per year is more than the stocks can sustain, because each population consists of no more than a few hundred individuals. The reason these populations are so small is that false killer whales have only one calf every 2-4 years, and as top predators, they do not occur in high densities. Also, like other cetaceans in many parts of the world, false killer whales in Hawaiian waters live in small populations that do not interbreed.

Q: What scientific data show that these stocks are separate and not part of one large population?

- Genetic analyses of tissue samples collected from false killer whales by scientists and fishery observers revealed that animals found close to the main Hawaiian Islands are distinct from those found farther offshore.
- Movement data from satellite-tagged false killer whales showed distinct movement patterns for animals from different populations.
- Many nearshore false killer whales have been photographed by scientists and then re-identified years later, indicating that they are resident to the Hawaiian Islands.

Q: How do scientists know that the abundance of these false killer whale stocks is so low?

A: NMFS and other scientists conducted eight months of ship-based surveys to estimate the abundance of marine mammals in waters surrounding Hawaii, Palmyra Atoll, and Johnston Atoll. These abundance estimates are based on accepted and peer-reviewed methods, and are published in the annual U.S. Pacific Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Report.

Q: What is a Take Reduction Team (TRT)?

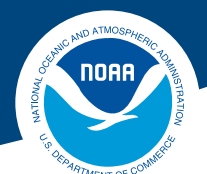
A: A TRT is an advisory group tasked with developing a plan for reducing mortalities and serious injuries of particular marine mammals. A TRT includes representatives from federal and state agencies, fishery management councils, academic and scientific organizations, environmental groups, and the commercial fishing industry. TRTs develop consensus recommendations, which are forwarded to NMFS and usually form the basis of federal regulations. TRT meetings are open to the public.



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Q: Why is a TRT being convened now?

A: Though NMFS was aware that interactions between the longline fisheries and false killer whales were occurring at an unsustainable level, NMFS lacked sufficient funding to begin the process of establishing a new TRT until late 2009.

Q: Which marine mammal stocks are involved?

A: The TRT will address mortality and serious injury of the Hawaii Pelagic, Hawaii Insular, and Palmyra Atoll false killer whale stocks.

Q: Which fisheries are involved?

A: The TRT will address the Hawaii-based deep-set and shallow-set pelagic longline fisheries.

Q: What are the next steps?

A: NMFS is convening the first meeting of the TRT in February 2010. The TRT will meet at least four times within 6 months to develop a draft Take Reduction Plan (TRP) by consensus, and will then submit that draft to NMFS.

Q: How does NMFS use the TRT's recommendations?

A: The TRT's recommendations usually form the basis of federal regulations. NMFS will consider the draft TRP when developing a proposed rule. NMFS will then consider public comments before issuing a final rule to implement a TRP. Once the plan is finalized and becomes effective, NMFS will monitor its progress and ensure the TRP meets the MMPA goal of reducing false killer whale mortalities and serious injuries in the fisheries to appropriate levels. If not, NMFS will re-convene the TRT to develop additional consensus recommendations for reducing mortalities and serious injuries and subsequently amend the TRP.

Q: Can I be on the TRT?

A: NMFS has already appointed TRT members on the basis of their expertise regarding the conservation or biology of the marine mammal species that the TRT will address, or the fishing practices that result in the incidental mortality and serious injury of such species, as required by the MMPA. However, TRT meetings are open to the public, and all interested stakeholders are encouraged to attend. Each meeting has a brief comment period during which members of the public may provide remarks directly relevant to the items presented or discussed during the meeting.

Glossary of terms

Pelagic - pertaining to the part of the open sea or ocean comprising the water column, i.e., all of the sea other than that near the coast or the sea floor.

Insular - associated with one or more islands

Serious injury – any injury that will likely result in mortality (>50% of the time).

Stock - as defined by the MMPA, the term “stock” means a group of marine mammals of the same species or smaller taxa in a common spatial arrangement, that interbreed when mature.

Take – as defined by the MMPA, the term “take” means to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal.

Acronyms

MMPA – Marine Mammal Protection Act

NMFS – National Marine Fisheries Service

TRT – Take Reduction Team

TRP – Take Reduction Plan

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