



Contact: Wende Goo
808-721-4098

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 21, 2012

NOAA announces rules to protect false killer whales off Hawaii

Measures reduce bycatch in longline fisheries; protect the insular population from extinction

Complying with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and two federal court orders, today NOAA Fisheries announced two actions to protect false killer whales in the Pacific Islands. False killer whales (*Pseudorca crassidens*), are members of the dolphin family and, though naturally uncommon, are found worldwide. As top predators, false killer whales play an important role in the biodiversity of the oceans by helping maintain balance within the ecosystem.

Rule to Reduce Bycatch under the Marine Mammal Protection Act

Under the MMPA, NOAA Fisheries is establishing measures to reduce incidental catch of two stocks of false killer whales in the Hawaii-based commercial longline fisheries. The MMPA requires the development of take reduction plans for certain marine mammal stocks where there is frequent or occasional bycatch of marine mammals in commercial fisheries. False killer whales in waters around Hawaii are incidentally caught in the Hawaii-based tuna and swordfish longline fisheries and have adapted to take bait and fish off longline fishing hooks, which can cause them to become hooked or entangled. Currently, the bycatch of two false killer whale stocks, the Hawaii Pelagic and Main Hawaiian Islands Insular stocks, exceed the allowable levels established by the MMPA.

“The steps NOAA Fisheries is taking today will help mitigate the impact on these populations of false killer whales from accidental bycatch by longline fishing,” said Sam Rauch, NOAA’s deputy assistant administrator for fisheries. “NOAA worked closely with fishermen and stakeholders to develop scientifically-based and common-sense solutions to reduce the unintended catch of these mammals. We look forward to continuing our conversations with fishermen and others on bycatch reduction efforts.”

In 2010, NOAA Fisheries convened a take reduction team of government, conservation, academic, and industry stakeholders to develop recommendations to reduce false killer whale interactions in Hawaii’s commercial longline fisheries.

After careful consideration of the team’s recommendations, NOAA Fisheries published a proposed take reduction plan in 2011. NOAA Fisheries revised several aspects of the plan in response to public comments and additional analyses. The final plan requires the use of specific fishing hooks, implements closed fishing areas, and requires fishermen to receive training and certification in ways to release false killer whales that are incidentally caught. NOAA is under a court order to issue the final plan by November 30.

NOAA Fisheries will continue to partner with state agencies, conservation organizations, and the fishing industry to find ways to further reduce bycatch of false killer whales without unduly hampering fishing activities.

Rule to List the Main Hawaiian Islands Insular Population under the Endangered Species Act

Complying with the Endangered Species Act and a court order to issue a final listing determination, NOAA Fisheries today is listing the Main Hawaiian Islands insular population of false killer whales as an endangered distinct population segment to protect it from possible extinction. The ESA defines an endangered species as “any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.”

Main Hawaiian Islands insular false killer whales, which are found in and around the waters of Hawaii’s eight main islands, face a number of threats, including their small population (estimated at only 151 individuals) and low genetic diversity, as well as hooking and entanglement in fisheries. Surveys conducted by several independent researchers indicate the population has been in decline for at least the past two decades. In taking this action, NOAA reviewed a range of factors, including the population’s risk of going extinct based on its small numbers, threats facing the population, and current efforts to protect the population. NOAA is currently under a court order to issue the final listing determination by December 10.

“NOAA Fisheries used the best data and scientific information available to make this determination,” continued Rauch. “Based on the whales’ small population size, low genetic diversity, and other factors, it became clear to list the Main Hawaiian Islands insular population under the ESA to protect them for future generations and to protect biodiversity in our oceans.”

NOAA Fisheries will continue to monitor the status of the Main Hawaiian Islands insular population of false killer whales through periodic surveys and assessments. NOAA Fisheries will also consider whether to propose designating critical habitat for the population, and will develop a recovery plan with actions to conserve the species. Finally, through the ESA consultation process, NOAA Fisheries will work with federal agencies to ensure that projects or activities that they fund, authorize, or carry out will not jeopardize the continued existence of the listed false killer whale population.

To read the ESA status review, MMPA stock assessment, and final ESA and MMPA actions, visit http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/PRD/prd_false_killer_whale.html

NOAA’s mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth’s environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Join us on Facebook, Twitter and our other social media channels at <http://www.noaa.gov/socialmedia/>.

On the Web:
<http://www.fpir.noaa.gov>