SPINNER DOLPHIN (*Stenella longirostris longirostris*): Northern Gulf of Mexico Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The spinner dolphin is distributed worldwide in tropical to temperate oceanic waters (Leatherwood and Reeves 1983; Perrin and Gilpatrick 1994). Sightings of these animals in the northern Gulf of Mexico (i.e., U.S. Gulf of Mexico) occur in oceanic waters and generally east of the Mississippi River (Figure 1; Mullin and Fulling 2004; Maze-Foley and Mullin 2006). Spinner dolphins were seen in all seasons during GulfCet aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico between 1992 and 1998 (Hansen *et al.* 1996; Mullin and Hoggard 2000).

Although there are only a few records from Gulf of Mexico waters beyond U.S. boundaries (e.g., Jefferson and Schiro 1997, Ortega Ortiz 2002), spinner dolphins almost certainly occur throughout the oceanic Gulf of Mexico (Jefferson *et al.* 2008), which is also composed of waters belonging to Mexico and Cuba where there is currently little information on cetacean species abundance and distribution. U.S. waters only comprise about 40% of the entire Gulf of Mexico, and 65% of oceanic waters are south of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

The Gulf of Mexico population is provisionally being considered a separate stock for management purposes, although there is currently no information to differentiate this stock from the Atlantic Ocean stock(s). Additional morphological, genetic and/or behavioral data are needed to provide further information on stock delineation.

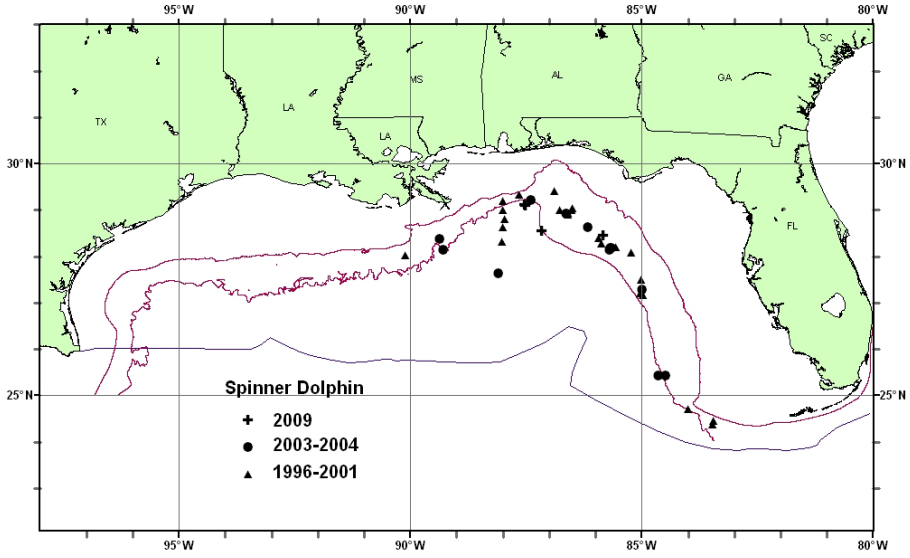

Figure 1. *Distribution of spinner dolphin sightings from SEFSC vessel surveys during spring 1996-2001, summer 2003 and spring 2004, and summer 2009. All the on-effort sightings are shown, though not all were used to estimate abundance. Solid lines indicate the 100m and 1,000m isobaths and the offshore extent of the U.S. EEZ.*

POPULATION SIZE

The best abundance estimate available for northern Gulf of Mexico spinner dolphins is 11,441 (CV=0.83; Table 1). This estimate is from a summer 2009 oceanic survey covering waters from the 200m isobath to the seaward extent of the U.S. EEZ.

Earlier abundance estimates

All estimates of abundance were derived through the application of distance sampling analysis (Buckland *et al.* 2001) and the computer program DISTANCE (Thomas *et al.* 1998) to line-transect survey data collected from ships in the oceanic northern Gulf of Mexico (i.e., 200m isobath to seaward extent of the U.S. EEZ) and are summarized in Appendix IV.

From 1991 through 1994, and from 1996 through 2001 (excluding 1998), annual surveys were conducted during spring along a fixed plankton-sampling trackline. Due to limited survey effort in any given year, the survey effort-weighted estimated average abundance of spinner dolphins for all surveys combined was estimated. For 1991 to 1994, the estimate was 6,316 (CV=0.43) (Hansen *et al.* 1995), and for 1996 to 2001, 11,971 (CV=0.71) (Mullin and Fulling 2004; Table 1).

During summer 2003 and spring 2004, surveys dedicated to estimating cetacean abundance were conducted along a grid of uniformly-spaced transect lines from a random start. The abundance estimate for spinner dolphins, pooled

from 2003 to 2004, was 1,989 (CV=0.48) (Mullin 2007; Table 1).

Recent survey and abundance estimate

During summer 2009, a line-transect survey dedicated to estimating the abundance of oceanic cetaceans was conducted in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Survey lines were stratified in relation to depth and the location of the Loop Current. The abundance estimate for spinner dolphins in oceanic waters during 2009 was 11,441 (CV=0.83; Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of abundance estimates for northern Gulf of Mexico spinner dolphins. Month, year and area covered during each abundance survey, and resulting abundance estimate (N_{best}) and coefficient of variation (CV).

Month/Year	Area	N_{best}	CV
Apr-Jun 1991-1994	Oceanic waters	6,316	0.43
Apr-Jun 1996-2001 (excluding 1998)	Oceanic waters	11,971	0.71
Jun-Aug 2003, Apr-Jun 2004	Oceanic waters	1,989	0.48
Jun-Aug 2009	Oceanic waters	11,441	0.83

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20th percentile of the log-normal distributed abundance estimate as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for spinner dolphins is 11,441 (CV=0.83). The minimum population estimate for the northern Gulf of Mexico is 6,221 spinner dolphins.

Current Population Trend

Four point estimates of spinner dolphin abundance have been made based on data from surveys covering 1991-2009. The estimates vary by a maximum factor of six. To determine whether changes in abundance have occurred over this period, an analysis of all the survey data needs to be conducted which incorporates covariates (e.g., survey conditions, season) that could potentially affect estimates. Nevertheless, differences in temporal abundance estimates will still be difficult to interpret without a Gulf of Mexico-wide understanding of spinner dolphin abundance. The oceanography of the Gulf of Mexico is quite dynamic, and the spatial scale of the Gulf is small relative to the ability of most cetacean species to travel. Studies based on abundance and distribution surveys restricted to U.S. waters are unable to detect temporal shifts in distribution beyond U.S. waters that might account for any changes in abundance.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. For purposes of this assessment, the maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.04. This value is based on theoretical modeling showing that cetacean populations may not grow at rates much greater than 4% given the constraints of their reproductive history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one half the maximum net productivity rate and a recovery factor (MMPA Sec. 3.16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is 6,221. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The recovery factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP), is assumed to be 0.5 because the stock is of unknown status. PBR for the northern Gulf of Mexico spinner dolphin is 62.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

There has been no reported fishing-related mortality of spinner dolphins during 1998-2010 (Yeung 1999; Yeung 2001; Garrison 2003; Garrison and Richards 2004; Garrison 2005; Fairfield Walsh and Garrison 2006; Fairfield-Walsh and Garrison 2007; Fairfield and Garrison 2008; Garrison *et al.* 2009; Garrison and Stokes 2010; 2011).

Fisheries Information

The commercial fishery which potentially could interact with this stock in the Gulf of Mexico is the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico large pelagic longline fishery (Appendix III). Pelagic swordfish, tunas and billfish are the targets of the longline fishery operating in the northern Gulf of Mexico. There were no reports of mortality or serious injury to spinner dolphins by this fishery during 1998-2010 (Yeung 1999; Yeung 2001; Garrison 2003; Garrison and Richards 2004; Garrison 2005; Fairfield Walsh and Garrison 2006; Fairfield-Walsh and Garrison 2007; Fairfield and Garrison 2008; Garrison *et al.* 2009; Garrison and Stokes 2010; 2011).

Other Mortality

Eleven spinner dolphins were reported stranded in the Gulf of Mexico during 2006–2010 (Table 2; NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database unpublished data, accessed 16 November 2011). Evidence of human interactions was detected for 1 stranded spinner dolphin, which stranded alive visibly oiled during June 2010 near Pensacola, Florida. No evidence of human interaction was detected for 1 stranded spinner dolphin, and for the remaining 9 spinner dolphins, it could not be determined if there was evidence of human interactions. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the marine mammals which die or are seriously injured in fishery interactions wash ashore, not all that wash ashore are discovered, reported or investigated, nor will all of those that do wash ashore necessarily show signs of entanglement or other fishery interaction. Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of fishery interactions.

An Unusual Mortality Event (UME) was declared for cetaceans in the northern Gulf of Mexico beginning 1 February 2010; and, as of early 2012, the event is still ongoing. It includes cetaceans that stranded prior to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (see "Habitat Issues" below), during the spill, and after. During 2010, 7 animals from this stock were considered to be part of the UME.

Table 2. Spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris longirostris*) strandings along the northern Gulf of Mexico coast, 2006–2010.

STATE	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	TOTAL
Alabama	0	0	0	3	0	3
Florida	0	0	0	0	7*	7
Louisiana	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mississippi	0	0	0	0	0	0
Texas	0	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	0	0	0	3	8	11

*These strandings are included in the Northern Gulf of Mexico UME

HABITAT ISSUES

The Deepwater Horizon (DWH) MC252 drilling platform, located approximately 50 miles southeast of the Mississippi River Delta in waters about 1500m deep, exploded on 20 April 2010. The rig sank, and for 87 days millions of barrels of oil and gas were discharged from the wellhead until it was capped on 15 July 2010. During the response effort dispersants were applied extensively at the seafloor and at the sea surface (Lehr *et al.* 2010; OSAT 2010). In-situ burning, or controlled burning of oil at the surface, was also used extensively as a response tool (Lehr *et al.* 2010). The oil, dispersant and burn residue compounds present ecological concerns. The magnitude of this oil spill was unprecedented in U.S. history, causing impacts to wildlife, natural habitats and human communities along coastal areas from western Louisiana to the Florida Panhandle (NOAA 2011). It could be years before the entire scope of damage is ascertained (NOAA 2011).

Shortly after the oil spill, the Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) process was initiated under the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. A variety of NRDA research studies are being conducted to determine potential impacts of the

spill on marine mammals. These studies have focused on identifying the type, magnitude, severity, length and impact of oil exposure to oceanic, coastal and estuarine marine mammals. The research is ongoing and likely will continue for some time. For continental shelf and oceanic cetaceans, the NOAA-led efforts include: aerial surveys to document the distribution, abundance, species and exposure of marine mammals and turtles relative to oil from DWH spill; and ship surveys to evaluate exposure to oil and other chemicals and to assess changes in animal behavior and distribution relative to oil exposure through visual and acoustic surveys, deployment of passive acoustic monitoring systems, collection of tissue samples, and deployment of satellite tags on sperm and Bryde's whales.

Aerial surveys have observed Risso's dolphins, spinner dolphins, pantropical spotted dolphins, striped dolphins, bottlenose dolphins and sperm whales swimming in oil in offshore waters (NOAA 2010a). The effects of oil exposure on marine mammals depend on a number of factors including the type and mixture of chemicals involved, the amount, frequency and duration of exposure, the route of exposure (inhaled, ingested, absorbed, or external) and biomedical risk factors of the particular animal (Geraci 1990; NOAA 2010b). In general, direct external contact with petroleum compounds or dispersants with skin may cause skin irritation, chemical burns and infections. For large whales, oil can foul the baleen they use to filter-feed. Inhalation of volatile petroleum compounds or dispersants may irritate or injure the respiratory tract, which could lead to pneumonia or inflammation. Ingestion of petroleum compounds may cause injury to the gastrointestinal tract, which could affect an animal's ability to digest or absorb food. Absorption of petroleum compounds or dispersants may damage kidney, liver and brain function in addition to causing immune suppression and anemia. Long term chronic effects such as lowered reproductive success and decreased survival may occur (Geraci 1990; NOAA 2010b).

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of spinner dolphins in the northern Gulf of Mexico, relative to OSP, is unknown. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this species. Total human-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock is not known. There is insufficient information available to determine whether the total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. This is not a strategic stock because it is assumed that the average annual human-related mortality and serious injury does not exceed PBR.

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