

ATLANTIC SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

A Regional Advisory Group to the National Marine Fisheries Service

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17 May 2010

Mr. Eric Schwaab
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1335 East-West Highway
Silver Spring Maryland 20910

Dear Mr. Schwaab.

We would like to provide you with the minutes and recommendations from the most recent meeting of the Atlantic Scientific Review Group (ASRG) held 3-5 February 2010. The ASRG commends NMFS for the quality of the presentations made by the NMFS staff, and the efforts made by all NMFS staff to make available the Stock Assessment Reports (SARs) to the ASRG in adequate time for thorough review.

With respect to marine mammal stocks in the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico, the ASRG has concerns about the following issues:

1. Last year in our letter we noted that due to funding constraints, there has been insufficient survey effort for marine mammals in the Gulf of Mexico in recent years. As a result, many Stock Assessment Reports now present outdated estimates of abundance, from only a subset of the stock's range within the EEZ. In some cases, these estimates are so old that they cannot be used in the stock assessment process. New surveys are urgently required for many stocks in this region. At our recent meeting we encouraged NMFS Southeast Region and Fisheries Science Center to develop a five year plan working with local, state and academic institutions to conduct surveys of selected estuarine and inshore stocks, as we believe that this would be a cost-effective solution to providing this needed information.
2. We expressed concern to NMFS representatives at our meeting about the increased levels of acoustic noise related to proposed energy-related projects for the east coast. This noise will be generated both in the survey, construction, and operational phases of these projects, and we believe that NMFS should be taking a stronger lead in addressing these potential threats.

Consistent with our concern in this area we would like to request a briefing from NMFS at our next meeting on its policy to address these concerns, and we would like to suggest that an expert familiar with these issues also be invited to our meeting to both make a presentation on our current knowledge of the impacts of acoustic noise related to energy related projects on marine mammals, and to participate in our discussions.

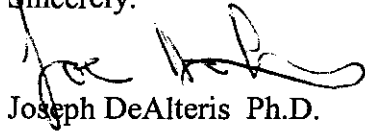
3. At our recent meeting Melissa Andersen provided a presentation that was given by Tom Eagle regarding the policy development for the serious injury and mortality guidelines and determination process. The ASRG is very interested in this policy as we have noted previously differences in the determinations made on the east coast and the west coast. The ASRG would like the opportunity to comment on the policy as it is developed and to review some of the initial case studies. Additionally, the ASRG offers its expertise in reviewing determinations, if needed. Several members of the ASRG have authored peer-reviewed publications or NMFS reports on this topic, and are well qualified to help.
4. The ASRG remains concerned about the high level of takes of harbor porpoises in the northeast gillnet fisheries, and while we are pleased with the results of the TRT process instituting a trigger with consequences, we are frustrated that the process has taken to so long to result in a final rule.
5. We continue to request that NMFS appoint an SRG member from the Caribbean to address the management of marine mammals in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. This appointment would help to initiate development of Stock Assessment Reports for U.S. Caribbean marine mammal populations, which are required by statute but currently lacking. The ASRG recommends the consideration of Dr. James "Buddy" Powell.

In addition, after considerable discussion on a variety of issues relative to the manatee stock assessments presented by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the ASRG prepared and sent a letter USFWS expressing its concern that the Florida manatee Stock Assessment Report should be regularly updated, especially in light of the recent UME and high count of manatees during synoptic surveys. We also suggest that USFWS finalize its population model, and that after peer review it should be incorporated into the updated SAR. We attach a copy of the letter for your information.

We have also sent a letter to the Directors of Northeast and Southeast Science Centers and their respective Regional Administrators covering a number of issues, and have included a copy of that letter herein for your reference.

The ASRG again wants to recognize the efforts of all the NMFS staff to make our meeting as productive as possible. We also greatly appreciate the hospitality shown by Dr. Don Baltz of LSU for hosting the meeting.

Sincerely.



Joseph DeAlteris Ph.D.
Chairman, Atlantic Scientific Review Group

Attachments:

1. Minutes of ASRG meeting
2. copy of ASRG letter to USFWS dated 17 May 2010
3. copy of ASRG letter to NERO, SERO, NEFSC, and SEFSC dated 17 May 2010

cc:

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