

ATLANTIC SCIENTIFIC REVIEW GROUP

A Regional Advisory Group to the National Marine Fisheries Service

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10 April 2009

Dr. James Balsiger
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1335 East-West Highway
Silver Spring Maryland 20910

Dear Dr. Balsiger

We would like to provide you with the minutes and recommendations from the most recent meeting of the Atlantic Scientific Review Group (ASRG) held 6-8 January 2009. 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.

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 over the content and recommendations in the two draft manatee Stock Assessment Reports and the Five Year Review. We attach a copy of the letter for your information.

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

1. 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 As a result, many Stock Assessment Reports now rely on outdated estimates of abundance from only a subset of the stock's range within the EEZ.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.

2. Observer coverage is required for several fisheries which likely take marine mammals, based on knowledge of takes from similar fisheries in other areas and, in some cases, observed takes in gear deployed for research purposes. In particular, observer coverage is required for the menhaden purse seine fishery and several coastal gillnet fisheries.
3. We 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 Caribbean marine mammal populations, which are required by statute but currently lacking. We suggest Natalie Ward as a possible candidate.

The ASRG again wants to recognize the efforts of the NMFS staff to make our meeting as productive as possible. We greatly appreciate the hospitality shown by the SERO office in St. Petersburg for hosting the meeting. We also recognize the financial constraints under which the agency is currently operating, and realize that the agency must prioritize activities.

Sincerely,

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

Attachments:

1. Minutes of 4-6 Jan 09 ASRG meeting
2. copy of ASRG letter to USFWS dated 10 Feb 09

Cc:

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