December 2009

BOTTLENOSE DOLPHIN (*Tursiops truncatus*)
Florida Bay Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The coastal morphotype of bottlenose dolphin is continuously distributed along the Atlantic coast south of Long Island, New York, to the Florida peninsula, including inshore waters of the bays, sounds and estuaries. Except for animals residing within the Southern North Carolina and Northern North Carolina Estuarine Systems (e.g., Waring *et al.* 2007), estuarine dolphins along the U.S. east coast have not previously been included in stock assessment reports. Several lines of evidence support a distinction between dolphins inhabiting coastal waters near the shore and those present in the inshore waters of the bays, sounds and estuaries. Photo-identification (photo-ID) and genetic studies support the existence of resident estuarine animals in several inshore areas of the southeastern United States (Caldwell 2001; Gubbins 2002; Zolman 2002; Mazzoil *et al.* 2005; Litz 2007), and similar patterns have been observed in bays and estuaries along the Gulf of Mexico coast (Wells *et al.* 1987; Balmer *et al.* 2008). Recent genetic analyses using both mitochondrial DNA and nuclear microsatellite markers found significant differentiation between animals biopsied along the coast and those biopsied within the estuarine systems at the same latitude (NMFS unpublished data). Similar results have been found off the west coast of Florida (Sellas *et al.* 2005).

Florida Bay is a shallow estuarine system that lies between the mainland of Florida and the Florida Keys and encompasses 2,200 km^2 of interconnected basins, grassy mud banks and mangrove islands. Florida Bay is bordered by the Florida mainland to the north, by the Florida Keys and Atlantic Ocean to the southeast, and by the Gulf of Mexico to the west. The western boundary of the Everglades National Park is generally considered to be the boundary between Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico. Here, Barnes Sound is not considered to be part of Florida Bay (Figure 1). Florida Bay was historically fed by runoff from the Everglades through marsh-like prairies called sloughs and a number of nearby creeks or inlets. The Bay connects through smaller inlets to Biscayne Bay, between Blackwater Sound and Barnes Sound. Freshwater flow from the Everglades is a major influence on the conditions within the Bay, particularly since tides have little effect on water levels due to mud banks which restrict water flow (Fourqurean and Robblee 1999).

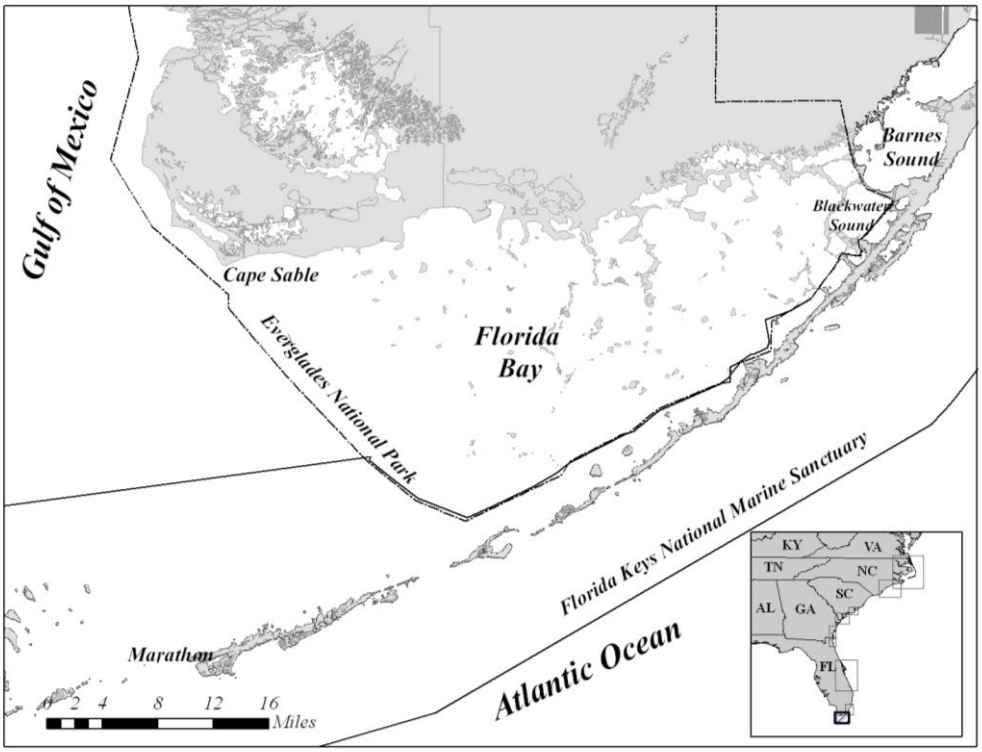

Figure 1. *Geographic extent of the Florida Bay stock. The boundaries of Everglades National Park and Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary are shown.*

The Florida Bay resident stock of bottlenose dolphins is considered to occur both within the bounds of Florida Bay and within the Gulf of Mexico-side portion of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS)

southwest to Marathon, Florida (Figure 1). The acutal range of the resident animals is unknown, but it likely extends beyond the boundaries of Florida Bay at times. For example, the range of Florida Bay dolphins may extend north into Barnes Sound; however, there have been few surveys of this area. In addition, it is likely that transient animals occur within the Florida Bay boundaries including perhaps offshore morphotype animals that move onshore from nearby oceanic waters. These boundaries are subject to change upon further study of dolphin home ranges within the Florida Bay estuarine system and comparison to an extant photo-ID catalog from Biscayne Bay to the north.

Live capture fisheries for bottlenose dolphins are known to have occurred throughout the southeastern U.S. and within Florida Bay. An active bottlenose dolphin live-capture fishery operating between 1962 and 1973 in the Florida Keys permanently removed 70 bottlenose dolphins for captive display in marine parks. Thirteen of these dolphins were confirmed removals from Florida Bay, and it is likely the remaining animals were from Florida Bay as well, but the absence of specific geographic data in the marine mammal inventory makes it difficult to confirm the remaining removal locations. No dolphins have been removed from Florida Bay or the Florida Keys since 1973 (NMFS Marine Mammal Inventory, July 24, 2004).

During 1995-1997, aerial surveys were conducted in Florida Bay to census bird populations, and opportunistic sightings of bottlenose dolphins were recorded. While these surveys did not estimate the abundance of bottlenose dolphins, the surveys documented the presence of dolphins in Florida Bay throughout the year (McClellan *et al.* 2000). Biopsy sampling was conducted in 1998 and 2002 for contaminant analyses (Fair *et al.* 2003). Sub-samples were later used for genetic analysis, and this study found significant genetic differentiation between Florida Bay and Biscayne Bay to the north (Litz 2007)

The Florida Bay bottlenose dolphin stock has been the subject of an ongoing photo-ID study by the Dolphin Ecology Project since 1999. From 1999 to 2000, preliminary information was collected focusing on the eastern, Atlantic, and central areas of the Bay, and in 2001 the surveys were expanded to include the western portion of the Bay including the region of transition to the Gulf of Mexico. Typically, photo-ID surveys were conducted during the 2 seasons of most extreme rainfall levels in Florida Bay, summer (the wet season, May-October) and winter (the dry season, November-April), allowing for the assessment of seasonal variation in the distribution of dolphins (Engleby *et al.* 2002). Surveys were conducted by a small vessel using standard photo-ID methods. Through 2007, the photo-ID catalog included 577 unique individuals. Sighting data confirm that dolphins range throughout the Bay and are present year-round (Engleby, unpublished data.)

During the summer (June-August) from 2002 to 2005, a study to investigate top predator (sharks and dolphins) distribution and foraging ecology was conducted in Florida Bay. The sighting histories of 437 unique individual dolphins further confirmed that dolphins are present in all areas of the Bay and demonstrate high individual site and foraging tactic fidelity (Torres 2007).

POPULATION SIZE

The first mark-recapture abundance survey of bottlenose dolphins in Florida Bay was conducted during May 2003 using photo-ID methods (Read *et al.*, in review). This survey resulted in a best estimate for abundance of bottlenose dolphins in Florida Bay of 514 (CV=0.17; Read et al., in review). This estimate accounts for the proportion of the population with unmarked fins. The mark-recapture abundance estimate is comparable to a direct count of known individuals from a long-term photo-ID catalog (n=577) and work by Torres (2007) which documented 437 individuals during summer months. Each of these counts or estimates of population size does not effectively distinguish resident from non-resident animals in the Bay and so are likely overestimates of the resident population.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate is the lower limit of the two-tailed 60% confidence interval of the log-normally distributed best abundance estimate. This is equivalent to the 20^{th} percentile of the log-normal distribution as specified by Wade and Angliss (1997). The best estimate of abundance for this stock is 514 (CV=0.17) obtained from the mark-recapture survey (Read *et al.* in review). The minimum population estimate for the Florida Bay stock of bottlenose dolphins is therefore 447.

Current Population Trend

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. 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 life history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate and a "recovery" factor (MMPA Sec. 3. 16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size of the Florida Bay stock of bottlenose dolphins is 447. 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 this stock is of unknown status. PBR for the Florida Bay stock of bottlenose dolphins is 4.5.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

There are no documented reports of fishery-related mortality or serious injury to this stock between 2003 and 2007. However, 1 bottlenose dolphin was entangled in a lobster pot and released alive in unknown condition.

Fishery Information

Most of Florida Bay lies within the boundaries of the Everglades National Park with a smaller portion that lies within the FKNMS. Commercial fishing in the Everglades National Park is prohibited. The majority of recreational fishing is hook and line, although dip nets, cast nests and landing nets are also used. The predominant commercial fishery in the FKNMS is stone crab and spiny lobster. There are no documented mortalities of bottlenose dolphins in crab or lobster pot fisheries in Florida Bay between 2003 and 2007.

Crab and Lobster Pots

During 2003-2007, 1 bottlenose dolphin was reported entangled in a lobster pot in the southern, FKNMS portion of Florida Bay and was released alive (condition unknown). Since there is no systematic observer program, it is not possible to estimate the total number of interactions or mortalities associated with crab and lobster pots.

Other Mortality

From 2003 to 2007, there were 7 additional stranded bottlenose dolphins in the boundaries of the Florida Bay stock (NOAA National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Database unpublished data, accessed 10 November 2008). Five of these animals stranded dead, but it could not be determined if there was evidence of human interactions for these cases. One animal was initially observed alive and entangled in debris associated with Hurricane Wilma, and the animal died after being released. In addition, 1 animal confirmed to be from the Dolphin Ecology Project photo-ID catalog was observed out of habitat and was captured, relocated and released (Southeast Region Stranding Network). The majority of stranding reports came from the portion of Florida Bay contained within the FKNMS, likely associated with the higher human population in this area. Aside from the 1 animal, it is unknown if stranded animals were from the Florida Bay stock or drifted in from adjacent waters. Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because not all of the marine mammals that die or are seriously injured in fishery interactions are discovered, reported or investigated, nor will all of those that are found 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.

Over the past several decades, large areas of the Everglades ecosystem have been significantly altered by engineered flood control and water distribution for urban and agricultural development. These alterations of freshwater flow into Florida Bay have resulted in increased algal blooms, mangrove and seagrass die-offs, trophic community shifts and changes in salinity. In response, multiple federal, state, county and local agencies are working on a Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program with the objective of restoring the natural flows of water, water quality and more natural hydro-periods within the ecosystem. As one of the largest ecosystem restoration efforts in the United States, projects are on-going and will likely impact physical and biotic parameters in Florida Bay. While it is unknown how alterations in water flow historically affected bottlenose dolphin abundance and distribution, it is known that bottlenose dolphins are a good indicator species to monitor the future health of this ecosystem due to the overlap between dolphin foraging behavior and abundant fish populations (see Torres and Urban 2005).

There is some concern about the potential effect of contaminants on the health of bottlenose dolphins in Florida Bay, due to their proximity to large agricultural and industrial operations. Contaminants of concern include persistent organic pollutants and heavy metals such as mercury. The agricultural pesticide endosulfan is of particular concern, with the majority (76%) of endosulfan used in the southeast discharging into the Everglades and Florida

Bay watershed (Pait *et al.* 1992). A study in 2003 collected remote biopsy samples and provided the first baseline data on levels of exposure to toxic persistent organic contaminants for dolphins in Florida Bay. Pesticides such as endosulfan were found at low or non-detectable concentrations (Fair *et al.* 2003). A review of available organochlorine exposure data from both dart biopsy and live-capture health assessment studies along the southeast U.S. coast indicate that contaminant levels were lowest for dolphins sampled in Florida Bay when compared to all other sites in the southeast U.S. Measured concentrations of total DDTs were lowest for dolphins sampled in Florida Bay. Reported total PCB concentrations were also lowest in Florida Bay and this was the only location in the southeast where samples fell below the toxic threshold value for total PCBs (Schwacke *et al.* 2004). There are no estimates of indirect human-caused mortality from pollution or habitat degradation.

STATUS OF STOCK

From 1995 to 2001, NMFS recognized only a single migratory stock of coastal bottlenose dolphins in the western North Atlantic, and the entire stock was listed as depleted as a result of the 1987-1988 mortality event. Scott *et al.* (1988) suggested that dolphins residing in the bays, sounds and estuaries adjacent to these coastal waters were not affected by the mortality event and these animals were explicitly excluded from the depleted listing (Federal Register: 54(195), 41654-41657; 56(158), 40594-40596; 58(64), 17789-17791).

The status of the Florida Bay stock 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 population trends for this stock. Total human-caused mortality and serious injury for this stock is not known and the total fishery-related mortality and serious injury for this stock is unknown, but given the lack of stranded animals with evidence of fishery interactions and the low level of commercial fishery activity within the stock boundaries, it is likely to be less than 10% of PBR, and can be considered to be insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. Therefore, NMFS does not consider the Florida Bay stock of bottlenose dolphins to be strategic.

REFERENCES CITED

Balmer, B.C., R.S. Wells, S.M. Nowacek, D.P. Nowacek, L.H. Schwacke, W.A. McLellan, F.S. Scharf, T.K. Rowles, L.J. Hansen, T.R. Spradlin and D.A. Pabst 2008. Seasonal abundance and distribution patterns of common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) near St. Joseph Bay, Florida, USA. J. Cetacean Res. Manage. 10(2): 157-167.

Barlow, J., S.L. Swartz, T.C. Eagle and P.R. Wade 1995. U.S. marine mammal stock assessments: Guidelines for preparation, background, and a summary of the 1995 assessments. NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-OPR-6. 73 pp.

Caldwell, M. 2001. Social and genetic structure of bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) in Jacksonville, Florida. thesis. University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. 143 pp.

Engleby, L.K., A.J. Read, D. Waples and L. Torres 2002. Habitat use of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in Florida Bay. Final Report to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center, National Marine Fisheries Service, 12 pp.

Fair, P., L. Schwacke, E. Zolman, W. McFee and L. Engleby 2003. Assessment of contaminant concentrations in tissues of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in Florida Bay. Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute Protect Wild Dolphins Grant. RFP-PWD-2001. final report 18 pp.

Fourqurean, J.W. and M.B. Robblee 1999. Florida Bay: A history of recent ecological changes. Estuaries 22(2B).

Gubbins, C. 2002. Association patterns of resident bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in a South Carolina estuary. Aquatic Mammals 28: 24-31.

Litz, J.A. 2007. Social structure, genetic structure, and persistent organohalogen pollutants in bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in Biscayne Bay, Florida. Ph.D. thesis. University of Miami. 140 pp.

Mazzoil, M., S.D. McCulloch and R.H. Defran 2005. Observations on the site fidelity of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in the Indian River Lagoon, Florida. Florida Scientist 68(4): 217-226.

McClellan, D.G., J.A. Browder, J.L. Tobias, G.J. Konoval, M.D. Hearon, O. Bass, J. Osborne and p. . 2000. Opportunistic sightings of bottlenose dolphin, *Tursiops truncatus*, along the Southeast Coast and Florida Bay, 1992-1997. NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-SEFSC-435. 18 pp.

Pait, A.S., A.E. DeSouza and D.R. Farrow 1992. Agricultural pesticide use in coastal areas: A national summary. NOS, NOAA, 112 pp.

Read, A.J., K.W. Urian, L.K. Engleby, D.M. Waples and B. Wilson in review. Abundance of bottlenose dolphins in Florida Bay. Bulletin of Marine Science.

Schwacke, L., A.J. Hall, R.S. Wells, G.D. Bossart, P. Fair, A.A. Hohn, P.R. Becker, J. Kucklick, G.B. Mitchum and P.E. Rosel 2004. Health and risk assessment for bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) populations along

the southeast United States coast: Current status and future plans. paper SC/56/E20 presented to the IWC Scientific Committee, Sorrento, Italy. 15 pp.

Scott, G.P., D.M. Burn and L.J. Hansen 1988. The dolphin dieoff: Long-term effects and recovery of the population. Conference proceedings, Oceans '88. IEEE Cat. No. 88-CH2585-8.

Sellas, A.B., R.S. Wells and P.E. Rosel 2005. Mitochondrial and nuclear DNA analyses reveal fine scale geographic structure in bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in the Gulf of Mexico. Conserv. Genet. 6(5): 715-728.

Torres, L.G. 2007. Top predator distribution and foraging ecology in Florida Bay. Ph.D. thesis. Duke University. 225 pp.

Torres, L.G. and D. Urban 2005. Using spatial analysis to assess bottlenose dolphins as an indicator of healthy fish habitat. Pages 423-436 *in*: S. A. Bortone, (ed.) Estuarine indicators. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL.

Wade, P.R. and R.P. Angliss 1997. Guidelines for assessing marine mammal stocks: Report of the GAMMS Workshop April 3-5, 1996, Seattle, Washington. NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-OPR-12. 93 pp.

Waring, G.T., E. Josephson, C.P. Fairfield-Walsh and K. Maze-Foley 2007. U.S. Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico marine mammal stock assessments – 2007. NOAA Tech Memo. NMFS NE 205. 415 pp.

Wells, R.S., M.D. Scott and A.B. Irvine 1987. The social structure of free ranging bottlenose dolphins. Pages 247-305 *in*: H. Genoways, (ed.) Current Mammology, Vol. 1. Plenum Press, New York. Vol. 1.

Zolman, E.S. 2002. Residence patterns of bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) in the Stono River estuary, Charleston County, South Carolina, U.S.A. Marine Mammal Science 18(4): 879-892.