

NMFS Office of Protected Resources

Review of October 21, 2015 Uncommon Stranding Event

April 21, 2016

NMFS has completed its review of the October 2015 San Diego County common bottlenose dolphin stranding event reported on November 4, 2015 (updated November 6, 2015). Based on the information available at this time, NMFS has preliminarily determined that the event does not necessitate modifications to the Letters of Authorization for the U.S. Navy's Hawaii Southern California Training and Testing (HSTT) under 50 CFR 218.78(c)(1) or notice and comment procedures under 50 CFR 216.106(e) or 50 CFR 218.78(c)(1)(ii). This decision may change based on additional information that becomes available.

As reported, on October 21, 2015, two common bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) were found dead at Imperial Beach and at Silver Strand Beach in San Diego, CA. NMFS identified the strandings as an Uncommon Stranding Event (USE) based on information indicating that the Navy was conducting a major training exercise (MTE) at the time. Although the Navy subsequently clarified that the MTE did not involve the use of sonar or explosives, the Navy verified brief mid-frequency active sonar use on October 19th and 20th during coincident unit-level training conducted within 80 nm of the stranding sites. Though not subject to the reporting requirements in the HSTT Settlement Agreement, a third bottlenose dolphin carcass was found in a state of advanced decomposition in Coronado on October 31, 2015, and is included within the scope of NMFS's review.

Consistent with its protocol for responding to USEs, NMFS and contractors recovered the animals that stranded on October 21 for laboratory necropsy, including partial body CT scans and sample collection for diagnostic analyses. A partial necropsy of the animal found on October 31 was performed at the stranding site. After compiling available information, NMFS convened a non-Federal expert panel consisting of 2 veterinary pathologists, 2 marine mammal veterinarians, and 1 marine mammal biologist to investigate the cause of death. All panelists have extensive experience reviewing cetacean necropsy and strandings. Data provided to and reviewed by the panel included gross necropsy, histopathological, and CT scan results, along with the full history of these and other common bottlenose dolphin strandings along the California coast for context.

Based on the information currently available, four of the five panelists agreed that the tight correlation between the gross necropsy findings including the lack of infectious pathogens (morbillivirus analyses were negative) or biotoxins (saxitoxin and domoic acid analyses were negative), the constrained geographic area, and the timing of the three strandings indicated that the dolphins were impacted by the same acute event that was likely anthropogenic in origin. There was also no external evidence of fishing gear interactions (i.e., external lesions or line marks) on the carcasses. However, with the current information, the team cannot determine cause(s) or contributing factor(s) for the strandings, and cannot rule out naval or other anthropogenic activities as a causal or contributing factor

at this time. The panel has requested additional information in order to conduct additional biological and environmental analyses. NMFS and the Navy are working to provide the necessary information.

Based on the available information and preliminary results of the panel review, which are currently insufficient to support a causal connection between the Navy's HSTT operations and the deaths of these animals, no actions are necessary pursuant to 50 CFR 216.106(e) or 50 CFR 218.78(c). NMFS will provide an update to this report and revisit its decision as warranted after additional analyses are completed.