



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
Silver Spring, MD 20910

NOV - 7 2017

Ms. Kate Wynne
Chair, Alaska Scientific Review Group
P.O. Box 210065
Auke Bay, Alaska 99821

Dear Ms. Wynne:

Thank you for your letter to Chris Oliver, NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, transmitting recommendations from the February 2017 meeting of the Alaska Scientific Review Group (SRG). Your letter was forwarded to me because the Office of Protected Resources within NOAA Fisheries is responsible for national programs under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and leads the agency's coordination of the SRGs.

The Alaska SRG made several valuable comments and recommendations to help guide marine mammal science and NOAA Fisheries' assessment of marine mammal stocks. Our responses are enclosed.

I appreciate the continued service and contributions by members of the Alaska SRG in providing advice and support to NOAA Fisheries in accordance with the MMPA. I look forward to our continued partnership to improve the science supporting the conservation of marine mammals.

Sincerely,

Donna S. Wieting
Director, Office of Protected Resources

Enclosure



Responses to Recommendations of the Alaska Regional Scientific Review Group

- 1) *Currently, the estimated fishery-related mortality for the Southeast Alaska harbor porpoise stock is close to its Potential Biological Removal (PBR) level. The Alaska SRG recommends NOAA Fisheries prioritize defining the genetic structure of the Southeast Alaska harbor porpoise stock, a key to assessing stock abundance and the true impact of fishery-related mortality. Specifically, the SRG encourages enhanced collection of genetic material from harbor porpoise throughout Southeast Alaska, including outer coast populations, via environmental DNA (eDNA) sampling and tissue sampling of stranded/bycatch porpoises. The Alaska SRG also encourages NOAA Fisheries to develop alternative means of monitoring harbor porpoise mortality in southeast Alaska and cooperate with coastal fishermen to reduce/mitigate fishery-related mortality.*

NOAA Fisheries agrees that obtaining a better understanding of genetic and stock structure for Southeast Alaska harbor porpoise is a high priority given the known fishery interactions. NOAA Fisheries has continued to fund Southeast Alaska harbor porpoise research, including eDNA analysis and modeling of porpoise distribution. Preliminary results will be shared at the next Alaska SRG meeting.

NOAA Fisheries currently lacks adequate funds to develop a survey program for detecting harbor porpoise abundance and trends. However, it may be possible to develop surveys to detect trends in specific areas where harbor porpoise-fishery interactions are the highest. We welcome recommendations about locations where survey effort could be focused and on survey designs that may achieve this objective.

Given the current lack of funding to operate the Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program, NOAA Fisheries is presently relying on two principal sources to assess harbor porpoise mortality and sub-lethal fishery interactions. First, the Marine Mammal Authorization Program requires fishermen to report interactions with marine mammals, and we recently developed a new outreach flier that we mailed to permit holders to encourage such reporting. Second, we receive reports of dead marine mammals via the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network (including a popular toll-free hotline), and we conduct necropsies to determine the cause of death when feasible.

- 2) *The North Pacific right whale is in danger of extinction; research on this population should be a NOAA Fisheries priority. One Alaska SRG recommendation for reducing prohibitive survey costs is to use gliders to search for and locate right whale calls. When calls are detected, the glider can signal the survey ship or aircraft, allowing for efficient location of right whales for subsequent approach and observation to document and photo-identify the number of individuals, obtain biopsies to determine the sex of animals (at present the sampled population is highly skewed towards males), and deploy satellite tags to better understand habitat use and wintering locations.*

There are no NOAA Fisheries funds at this time to cover the high cost of an aerial or vessel survey for right whales in the eastern North Pacific. However, the NOAA Fisheries Alaska

Fisheries Science Center's Marine Mammal Laboratory (MML) has been aggressively seeking collaborations with various agencies or organizations who have a joint interest in understanding this critically endangered population. MML is currently collaborating with the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and the Government of Japan in a comprehensive vessel survey of the eastern and central Bering Sea in 2017-2018, with a possible extension to the western Bering Sea in 2019. The 2017 cruise incorporates passive acoustic monitoring for the first time and has already documented right whale calls; additionally, some individual whales have been photographed and biopsied. Preliminary findings of the 2017 cruise will be presented at the next Alaska SRG meeting.

- 3) *There is a long and valuable time series of 12 abundance estimates for Western Arctic bowhead whales, starting in 1978. Current PBR is calculated from the 2011 abundance estimate only. Although the stock has been increasing steadily and is not in danger, performing population modeling and analysis of this time series would be valuable as it would provide rare information on large whale population dynamics (e.g., intrinsic growth rate, density-dependence) and would likely allow better estimation of historical abundance and carrying capacity. It would also allow for estimating recent abundance based on all the information contained in the data rather than using only a single survey, and would increase confidence in the PBR. Short-term projections of this model would provide information on population trend and may reduce the need for frequent expensive surveys.*

NOAA Fisheries will discuss this suggestion with the North Slope Borough (NSB), Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission (AEWC), and other stakeholders to assess the potential utility of such modeling. Further, in preparation for the 2018 meetings of the IWC Scientific Committee and the Commission, where discussions will focus on setting new 6-year block catch limits for Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling species (including western Arctic (i.e., BCB) bowhead whales), the U.S. delegation will be working closely with the NSB and the AEWC in summarizing available information on stock status. A summary of this information will be provided to the Alaska SRG when available. In the meantime, we are making plans for a new aerial abundance survey in the spring of 2019 to be conducted in collaboration with the NSB.

- 4) *At this meeting, NOAA staff briefed the Alaska SRG on planning efforts related to the upcoming Pacific Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (PacMAPP). These ship-based surveys will assess marine mammals and oceanographic conditions in several broad regions in the Pacific Ocean. The Alaska SRG wholeheartedly supports PacMAPP and dedicated shipboard surveys in the Gulf of Alaska and Bering Sea that focus on estimating the abundance of all cetaceans, with priorities on harbor porpoise and North Pacific right whales.*

NOAA Fisheries appreciates the Alaska SRG's support and will keep the group apprised of plans to implement PacMAPP in Alaska. The Navy and Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) need abundance and distribution information for marine mammals and seabirds to address specific regulatory requirements (e.g., obtain permits, prepare environmental assessment reports) pertinent to conducting their activities at sea. Note that the main focus areas of interest to BOEM and the Navy with regard to PacMAPP are Cook Inlet (BOEM – oil and gas leases and transport) and limited areas in the central Gulf of Alaska (Navy – associated with at-sea

exercises). The provisional dates for the first PacMAPP surveys in Alaska are scheduled for 2021 in the eastern half of the Gulf of Alaska. Additional interagency discussion still needs to occur to define total survey requirements in these regions. For these surveys to be implemented, NOAA Fisheries would need to secure ship time and partial funding support in addition to resource levels currently available.