

Marine Mammals Committee

Committee Members: R. L. Brownell, Jr., C. M. Callahan, K. Dudzinski, J. P. Dines (Chair), H. H. Edwards, T. J. McIntyre, D. K. Odell, T. J. O'Shea, C. W. Potter, and S. Sheffield.

Mission:

The marine mammals committee was formed in 1921 and Chaired by E. W. Nelson. It is the longest-standing active committee of the American Society of Mammalogists. Its mission is to maintain and encourage interest in marine mammals in the ASM, to provide the Society membership with information about marine mammalogy, including conservation and legislative issues, to spearhead resolutions and legislation involving marine mammals, and to serve as a liaison between ASM and the Society for Marine Mammalogy (SMM). Members of the Marine Mammals Committee are frequently active in both ASM and SMM.

Information Items:

(1) Members of the Committee have monitored and communicated with each other over the course of the year on issues pertinent to the conservation of marine mammals.

(2) Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Reports

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are required to publish Stock Assessment Reports for all stocks of marine mammals within U.S. waters, reviewing new information annually for strategic stocks and every three years for non-strategic stocks. The Final 2012 Marine Mammal Stock Assessments for species under NMFS jurisdiction is available at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/sars/region.htm>.

(3) California Sea Lion Management in the Columbia River

In February 2013 a US District Judge ruled that NMFS acted properly when it authorized in 2012 the states of Oregon, Washington, and Idaho to lethally remove individual California Sea Lions when other efforts to deter them from feeding on endangered salmon at the Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River had failed.

(4) California Sea Lion Unusual Mortality Event in California

Beginning in January 2013, elevated strandings of California Sea Lion pups were observed in Southern California (Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties). As of late April, live sea lion strandings were ten times higher than the historical average and an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) was declared by the National Marine Fisheries Service. The UME has been confined to pups born in summer 2012. Consistent findings in the sea lions are emaciation and dehydration with most animals being very underweight for their age. As part of the UME investigation process, an independent team of scientists has been assembled to coordinate with the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events to review the data collected and to determine potential next steps.

(5) Prescott Grant Program Eliminated

Since its inception in 2001, the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant

Program has awarded more than \$40 million in competitive grants to organizations that respond on behalf of the National Marine Fisheries Service to live and dead marine mammal strandings. The Prescott Grant Program has contributed to unprecedented improvements to the primarily volunteer stranding networks and many stranding response organizations rely on the grants as their primary funding source. The Prescott Grant Program was not funded in the 2013 federal budget and under the proposed 2014 federal budget will be entirely eliminated.

(6) Harbor Porpoise Bycatch in the New England Groundfish Fishery

To reduce the incidental serious injury and mortality of harbor porpoises taken in the New England groundfish gillnet fisheries, NMFS established the Harbor Porpoise Take Reduction Team (HBTRT), consisting of representatives from NMFS, various state resource agencies, the fishing industry, environmental organizations, and marine mammal biologists. To avoid the closure of fishing territories important to them, fishermen agreed to use acoustical pingers, devices that emit a sound to warn cetaceans of the presence of fishing nets and are shown to reduce bycatch mortality by as much as 95 percent. The entire HBTRT agreed by mutual consent that if cetacean mortalities reached a predefined threshold, certain fishery areas would be temporarily closed to gillnet fishing. Last year harbor porpoise mortality reached twice the acceptable rate in the Gulf of Maine Fishery and NMFS announced a closure of that fishery during Oct-Nov 2012. In response to fishing industry protests and ignoring the scientific opinion of marine mammal biologists on the HBTRT, NMFS changed the closure dates from Oct-Nov 2012 to Feb-March 2013. There is deep concern among marine mammal scientists and others that NMFS acted unilaterally to favor the fishing industry to the detriment of harbor porpoise populations in the Gulf of Maine.

Action Items: None.

Respectfully submitted,

James P. Dines

jdines@nhm.org