

Report from the Serious Injury Subcommittee of the Alaska Scientific Review Group

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The Alaska Scientific Review Group (AKSRG) was asked by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) staff to review a table of humpback whale entanglements planned for inclusion in the 2004 Alaska Stock Assessment Report (“SAR Table”). For each event, the group was asked to determine those events that would result in “Serious Injury or Death” and those that would not. No category was provided for outcomes that “Cannot Be Determined” and no place was provided to list “Criteria Used” in making the determination. Divergent responses were submitted which raised issues for discussion at the November 2003 meeting. SRG members raised concerns that, while dichotomous outcome determinations (Will vs Won’t Die) are ideally suited for MMPA implementation, they were difficult to make based on the data provided. Several sources of uncertainty and interpretational discrepancies were discussed that led to differences among SRG responses. Given the management implications of this ambiguity, the ASRG suggested that the definition and determination of lethal entanglement should be a NMFS priority, warranting a joint discussion among SRGs and formal advice to NMFS.

To address this issue, AKSRG formed a subcommittee to provide more detailed response to NMFS regarding “Serious Injury” determinations. The subcommittee included five experienced Alaskan marine mammalogists (the authors), three of whom have received NMFS training in whale disentanglement assessment and response. The subcommittee agreed to reassess the outcome of humpback whale entanglement events in the “SAR Table” and identify the criteria they used to determine which events likely represented lethal interactions. While doing this, the subcommittee encountered inconsistencies in information provided in the SAR Table that could alter their outcome determinations.

Complete agreement by this group of marine mammalogists regarding the anticipated outcome of entanglement or collision occurred in less than 18% of the cases presented. Comments made by committee members indicated their difficulties making objective outcome determinations were due to insufficient information and/or sources of subjectivity. In more than 80% of cases, at least one member believed the information provided was inadequate to determine the likely outcome of the incident. As a result of this exercise, three sources of subjectivity were identified by subcommittee members with suggestions for their minimization.