Pacific Islands Region

Hawaiian Monk Seal PEIS

October 2010
Newsletter #1

NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

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Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions

Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement

This newsletter is the first in a series of four newsletters regarding the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS). It is being mailed to federal, state, and local agencies; elected and appointed officials; Native Hawaiian groups; other interested organizations; and individual citizens within or adjacent to the project area to inform people about the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and to request scoping comments. This and subsequent newsletters can be found on the project website: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/hawaiianmonkseal.htm. The purpose of this newsletter is to invite you to participate in the public scoping comment process and provide some background information on the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions PEIS.

Scoping Meetings Announced

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Pacific Islands Regional Office is preparing a PEIS to assess the impacts of implementing specific management actions and administering a research and enhancement program to improve survival of Hawaiian monk seals *(Monachus schauinslandi)* in the Northwestern and Main Hawaiian Islands.

Publication of the Notice of Intent was published in the *Federal Register* on October 1, 2010, which began the official 45-day scoping period for this PEIS. Scoping is a part of the NEPA process that invites affected and interested people, agencies, and groups to help:

- identify concerns about the proposed action;
- define a range of alternatives;
- determine and define the scope of issues to be examined;
- identify other environmental and consultation requirements;
- identify related environmental documents being prepared; and
- identify potentially interested parties.

The scoping comment deadline is November 15, 2010.

In the News

What is NEPA?

NEPA requires federal agencies (such as NMFS) to consider and disclose the potential consequences of its decisions on the human environment before deciding to proceed with a proposed action.

A range of reasonable alternatives, including an alternative considering no action as required by NEPA, will be developed and analyzed in the PEIS. The alternatives must address the requirements of NEPA as well as the legal, regulatory, and budgetary parameters that govern the research and enhancement (for example, the Endangered Species Act [ESA]). Through scoping and subsequent discussions, the public will assist in developing the alternatives to be addressed in the PEIS process.

The potential impacts of the alternatives will be assessed and the results of the analyses will be documented in the Draft PEIS, which the public will have an opportunity to review. Comments on the Draft PEIS received from agencies and the public will be considered and incorporated, as applicable, into the Final PEIS.

During preparation of this PEIS, the public and interested groups and agencies will have an opportunity to:

- understand the requirements for NEPA compliance;
- make recommendations on how recovery activities should be conducted; and
- review decision-making options for management, research and enhancement by NMFS.

The PEIS process is scheduled for completion in late 2011.

Why is a PEIS needed?

The intent of this PEIS is to evaluate, in compliance with NEPA, the potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts on the human environment of the proposed activities under the Hawaiian monk seal recovery program.

Steps in the NEPA Process

- Notice of Intent (NOI) to Prepare a PEIS
- We are here → *Scoping
- Alternatives Analysis
- *Draft PEIS Issued
  Available for 60-day Public Review
- *Public Hearing on Draft PEIS
- Public Comment Review and Synthesis
- Response to Comments/Prepare Final PEIS
- Selection of Preferred Alternatives
- *Final PEIS Issued
  Available for Minimum 30-day Public Review
- *Record of Decision
  Public Statements of Agency Decisions

*indicates steps where there is an opportunity to provide public input

Project Description

NMFS is the federal agency responsible for management of Hawaiian monk seals under the ESA and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). NMFS currently funds, authorizes, and conducts research and enhancement activities on Hawaiian monk seals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and Main Hawaiian Islands. In 1976, NMFS listed Hawaiian monk seals as "endangered" under the ESA and "depleted" under the MMPA. A Recovery Plan was developed by NMFS for the species in 1983 and revised in 2007. Under this plan, there are funds designated and allocated to NMFS for the purpose of promoting Hawaiian monk seal recovery. NMFS administers these funds, issues permits, and implements recovery actions that include research and enhancement activities (for example, population counts, tagging, and tissue sampling).

Public Scoping Meeting Schedule

Honolulu, O'ahu
Wednesday, October 20, 2010; 5:30 pm - 8:30 pm

Central Union Church
1660 South Beretania St.

Hilo, Hawai'i
Thursday, October 21, 2010; 6 pm - 9 pm

Mokupāpapa Discovery Center
308 Kamehameha Ave., Ste 109

Kīhei, Maui
Monday, October 25, 2010; 6 pm - 9 pm

NOAA Sanctuaries New Community Learning Center
726 South Kihei Rd.

Kaunakakai, Moloka'i
Tuesday, October 26, 2010; 6 pm - 9 pm

Hale Mahaolu Home Pumehana
290 Kolapa Pl.

Līhu'e, Kaua'i
Wednesday, October 27, 2010; 6 pm - 9 pm

Wilcox Elementary School
4319 Hardy St.

Purpose and Need for Management Actions and Research and Enhancement Activities

The purpose of this proposed action is to assure the long-term viability of the Hawaiian monk seals in the wild, allowing initially for reclassification to threatened status and, ultimately, removal from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife under the ESA. The Hawaiian monk seal population has experienced a prolonged decline and currently only approximately 1,200 monk seals remain.

Numerous threats to the survival of Hawaiian monk seals are identified in the 2007 Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan. In the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, young seals are starving, pups are being killed by sharks, seals are getting entangled in marine debris, and sea level rise threatens terrestrial habitats. Low juvenile survival over the past two decades is the primary cause of the population's decline, and the population decline will likely continue without intervention. Enhancement activities, including but not limited to translocating seals from areas of lower to higher survival, are being considered to improve juvenile survival and the overall health of the population.

A comprehensive research program enables NMFS to recognize, and possibly quantify, factors limiting the population in order to designate appropriate actions to minimize impacts of human-induced activities and other factors affecting Hawaiian monk seal survival. Data and analyses derived from research lead to improved decision-making, and strategic management and enhancement activities that promote population recovery, prevent harm and avoid jeopardy or continued disadvantage to the species. Research and monitoring will continue to play a key role in determining whether enhancement activities achieve their desired outcomes.

How can I participate in the process?

Public Scoping Meetings

There are several opportunities to participate in the PEIS process. Five public scoping meetings will be held to present information to the public and obtain input. Dates for the public scoping meetings are provided in this newsletter and will be announced in newspapers and the project website at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/hawaiianmonkseal.htm.

There will be an open house for the first 30 minutes of each meeting followed with a presentation to describe the project and process. An opportunity for questions, answers, and oral comments will be given after the presentation.

The public scoping comment period will be open until November 15, 2010. Comments may be submitted at the public scoping meetings verbally and/or in writing, or outside of the public scoping meetings by e-mail, fax, or by letter to the address provided at the end of this newsletter.

Your comments are important to us; particularly at this early stage of the process.

Other Ways to Participate

The pre-addressed comment form accompanying this newsletter can be used to submit written comments at any time during the scoping period. Comments received from the public during scoping will be reviewed and incorporated, as applicable, in the PEIS.

Once the Draft PEIS is complete, the document will be released to the public to review for a period of 60 days. During the review period, NMFS will conduct public hearings to accept comments on the Draft PEIS document. Public testimony and written or e-mailed comments will be accepted during this period.

NMFS will maintain a mailing list throughout the process. Newsletters will be distributed to those on the mailing list. If you need additional information about the project, have any questions, or are interested in being added to or removed from the project mailing list please contact Jeff Walters, the NMFS Project Manager for the PEIS by mail or e-mail listed below. Please submit your written comments regarding the PEIS to:

National Marine Fisheries Service
Pacific Islands Regional Office
Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions PEIS
1601 Kapiolani Blvd., Ste. 1110
Honolulu, HI 96814
e-mail: monkseal@noaa.gov
website: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/hawaiianmonkseal.htm

In 2009, 113 seals were individually identified in the main Hawaiian Islands, based on flipper tag ID numbers or unique natural markings. Including seals that have not been individually identifed, NMFS researchers estimate the total number of monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands is at least 150.

Where do monk seals go to find food?

Monk seals hunt for food outside the immediate shoreline areas, primarily in the region that is 60-300 feet deep. If fishermen are throw-netting or shore-casting, they will likely not be fishing in the area where the monk seals feed. However, monk seals and fishermen do, on rare occasion, use the same areas. This usually happens along the shoreline as seals leave to or return from feeding. Seals have also been known to eat catch from nets, and bait from fishing hooks. When this happens the seals can become a nuisance. Seals may eat fish and bait because they are "opportunistic feeders." This means that they will feed on a food source if it is "easy" for them to get. They learn these habits quickly. Ultimately this behavior is bad for both seals and fishermen.

For more information on Hawaiian monk seals, including recommendations to reduce monk seal interactions with fishing gear, please view the FAQ sheet titled "FAQ: How to prevent seals from getting your fish and bait," available for download at the following website: http://www.fpir.noaa.gov/PRD/prd_hawaiian_monk_seal.html.

Photos taken under ESA-MMPA Permit 932-1905