



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

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Douglas P. Nowacek, Ph.D.  
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Dear Dr. Nowacek:

Thank you for your letter to Eileen Sobeck, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, transmitting recommendations from the February 2014 meeting of the Atlantic Scientific Review Group (SRG). Your letter was forwarded to me because the Office of Protected Resources within NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is responsible for national programs under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and leads NMFS' coordination of the SRGs. The SRG makes a number of valuable comments and recommendations to guide marine mammal science. I address them below.

#### Marine Mammal Stock Assessments

NMFS recognizes the importance of the stock assessment process and seeks to better enable inter-annual comparisons to estimate abundance and trends. During the last several years the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) and Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) have been working on standardizing general data collection methods and developing appropriate analytical methods. In regard to data collection, the last several large scale SEFSC/NEFSC abundance surveys conducted in 2011 and 2013 were planned to cover the same area using the same vessels with nearly the same track lines and data collection methods and even some of the same observers. However, due to weather conditions, not all track lines could be covered. Using these similar data collection methods should allow for easy inter-annual comparisons. In addition, the non-summer aerial surveys used to estimate density (not necessarily a population estimate) that were conducted by the SEFSC and NEFSC allow NMFS to use the same general data collection methods in the same area collected from the same types of observation platforms (NOAA Twin Otters). In regards to data analyses, under the Atlantic Marine Assessment Program for Protected Species (AMAPPS), the NEFSC and SEFSC are developing spatially-explicit density/abundance estimation methods (using general additive models and hierarchical Bayesian frameworks) that can result in predicted abundance estimates for a study area even where there are different gaps in coverage during different years. These analyses will allow the estimation of abundance estimates over the exact same area, which will lead to the investigation of temporal trends. In addition, NEFSC is developing a long-term seal research plan that incorporates aerial survey intervals suitable for examining trends in abundance.

NMFS is exploring options to increase the use of charter/contract non-NOAA vessels, as well as leveraging and expanding our research collaboration with other Federal partners to conduct multispecies and ecosystem assessment surveys in U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) regions. We are also exploring a rotating schedule of cruises following regular trackline grids at



a spatial resolution of 60 nautical miles. Depending on available funding and external collaboration, this would potentially allow the continental EEZs to be surveyed every five years.

#### Late Submission of Some Stock Assessment Reports to the SRG

NMFS regrets that 7 Southeast SARs were not ready in time for the Atlantic SRG meeting and appreciates the great lengths the SRG took to accommodate the delayed review of these reports. NMFS takes its statutory obligations seriously, and our goal is to provide the best reports that we can with our available resources. The SRG Terms of Reference stipulates that NMFS will provide draft SARs to the SRG for review no later than three weeks prior to a scheduled meeting.

#### Implementation of the SRG Terms of Reference

I appreciate the Atlantic SRG's support of the newly finalized Terms of Reference (TOR). We are currently beginning to implement the terms contained in the document, and I anticipate a smooth transition. I am grateful for the SRG's prompt action to incorporate the TOR as SOP and to develop a plan for membership rotation to be considered at the 2015 meeting. The SRG's emphasis on the need and importance of institutional memory is recognized and will be kept in mind as we work with the SRGs to review the membership of the three SRGs. Thank you for your commitment to offering well-informed and consistent guidance to NMFS.

#### Need for Increased Research Emphasis on North Atlantic Right Whales

NMFS agrees wholeheartedly regarding the need to monitor changes in North Atlantic right whale distribution. This year, the NEFSC has taken several steps to do this, including deploying marine autonomous recording units on the outer edge of Georges' Bank, as well as longer-term recorders at three sites offshore of right whales' "normal" distribution. NEFSC staff are collaborators on a grant to develop and test Slocum gliders, wavegliders, and new real-time acoustic buoys to assess whales' distribution and to locate whales for aerial photographic identification. Additionally, the aerial survey program increased the range of its surveys this year to include Canadian waters. All this work was done in collaboration with many colleagues such as Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, the New England Aquarium, Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Dalhousie University, and Cornell University as well as with many other partners.

#### The Importance of the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue Assistance Grant Program

NMFS agrees that the National Marine Mammal Stranding Network plays an important role in collecting information on marine mammal unusual mortality events (UMEs) and human interactions. The valuable data compiled by the Stranding Network and provided to NMFS is used for informing marine mammal stock assessment reports, identifying key species recovery activities, monitoring ocean health, and identifying natural and human causes of stranding and death in marine mammals around the country.

In light of our country's current fiscal situation, we have had to make difficult choices about our budget, including reducing funding to programs that are valuable to the agency. While there have been gaps in stranding network coverage that are not related to the lack of Prescott Grant funds, NMFS recognizes the reduction in funding for the Prescott Grant Program could have significant impacts on some Stranding Network operations and intends to partially restore the Program's funding in fiscal year (FY) 2014. The FY 2014 Prescott awards will be announced

later this summer. We are accepting applications for the FY 2015 grant cycle through October 8, 2014.

Additionally, funding for the current East Coast and Gulf of Mexico UME investigations is being provided by NMFS, UME Contingency Fund, John H. Prescott Grant Program, Emergency Prescott Grant Program and our Stranding Network partners.

I appreciate the continued contributions of the Atlantic SRG and look forward to your future recommendations to improve the science supporting the conservation of marine mammals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Donna S. Wieting". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "D".

Donna S. Wieting  
Director  
Office of Protected Resources