



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

7 August 2012

Mr. Timothy J. Van Norman
Chief, Branch of Permits
Division of Management Authority
Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 North Fairfax Drive
Arlington, VA 22203

Re: Renewal of Permit No. MA039386
(U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,
Marine Mammals Management Office)

Dear Mr. Van Norman:

The Marine Mammal Commission, in consultation with its Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals, has reviewed the above-referenced permit application with regard to the goals, policies, and requirements of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The Marine Mammals Management Office is requesting authorization to conduct research on walrus in the Bering and Chukchi Seas during a four-year period. The proposed activities were authorized under the same permit number and under exigent circumstances in July 2012 for a period of one year. The Management Office is seeking to renew those activities for an additional four years.

RECOMMENDATION

The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issue the permit renewal for a four-year period, provided that the current permit conditions remain in effect.

RATIONALE

The Marine Mammals Management Office within the Alaska Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to conduct research on walrus in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. The objectives of the proposed research are to (1) determine the abundance and demographic rates of walrus by conducting a long-term, large scale genetics-based mark-recapture program and (2) monitor movement and haul-out patterns through aerial surveys and satellite telemetry. The Commission recommended in its 18 July 2011 letter that the Management Office sponsor a review of its mark-recapture assessment approach before initiating field work. Accordingly, the Management Office changed its objectives for the first few years of its research from obtaining estimates of abundance and demographic rates to addressing the feasibility of a genetics-based mark-recapture study. However, the proposed activities (i.e., aerial surveys, biopsy sampling, and tagging) have not changed.

Researchers would conduct aerial surveys in Bristol Bay and northwest Alaska at a minimum altitude of approximately 457 m. Based on their experience with past surveys, the researchers do not believe that surveys flown at that altitude will disturb walrus. However, they have requested authorization to take 10,000 walrus per year incidental to those aerial surveys.

The Management Office also is requesting authorization to harass, biopsy sample, and attach satellite radio transmitters to walruses in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. The researchers propose to biopsy sample 6,000 walruses per year using a crossbow from a distance of 30 m. Fifty of those animals would be biopsy sampled and tagged simultaneously by two researchers using crossbows from a distance of 15 m. Researchers would biopsy sample and tag walruses on land, on ice, or in the water. Walruses of any age class could be biopsy sampled, but only adult walruses would be tagged. The Management Office would harass 9,000 walruses per year incidental to biopsy sampling and tagging activities. It has indicated that it would minimize disturbance of walruses on land or in shallow water by using beach cover, camouflage clothing, or a blind or by approaching downwind of animals. To minimize disturbance of walruses on ice, the researchers would back the boat away from the animals directly after they have deployed and/or retrieved the biopsy dart. Any disturbance that would result in displacement of walruses also would reduce the number of animals available to be sampled, so the researchers have an incentive to avoid disturbing walruses to the greatest extent practicable. They would document and report the number of walruses harassed incidental to conducting the biopsy sampling and tagging activities.

In addition, researchers would work with Alaska Native groups and Russian colleagues to obtain additional biopsy samples. The Management Office also is requesting authorization to collect an unlimited number of tissue samples and parts from dead beachcast walruses and walruses taken by subsistence hunters. Samples could be imported or exported, and the Management Office is aware of the need to obtain the necessary permits under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora before importing or exporting any walrus part.

The Management Office requests authorization to kill unintentionally one walrus per year. The current permit conditions allow one stampede per year and one unintentional mortality per year contingent on the Management Office consulting with the Service. If, however, researchers cause an additional stampede or kill an additional walrus, then they have to suspend their activities. The Marine Mammal Commission agrees that those conditions are warranted and recommends that the Fish and Wildlife Service issue the permit renewal for a four-year period, provided that the current permit conditions remain in effect. If more than one stampede or walrus death occurs and research activities are suspended, then those activities should be reviewed promptly and modified to address the cause(s). The research then should be allowed to resume, with a requirement for further suspension and review if additional stampedes or deaths occur.

The Management Office indicated that the activities have been reviewed and approved by its Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, as required by section 2.31 of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Animal Welfare Act regulations.

The Commission believes that the activities for which it has recommended approval are consistent with the purposes and policies of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Mr. Timothy J. Van Norman
7 August 2012
Page 3

Please contact me if you have any questions concerning the Commission's recommendation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Timothy J. Ragen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director