



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

20 September 2011

Bill Walker, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
1141 Bayview Avenue
Biloxi, Mississippi 39530

Dear Dr. Walker:

The Marine Mammal Commission held its 2011 annual meeting on 10-12 May in New Orleans, Louisiana. Most of the meeting focused on federal and state responses to the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill and assessment of short- and long-term spill effects on marine mammals in the Gulf of Mexico. Dr. Phil Bass, a former employee of your Department and currently Executive Director of the Gulf of Mexico Alliance, participated in the Commission's meeting and described the state's response and assessment efforts. Mississippi has played, and undoubtedly will continue to play, an important role in the BP oil spill response, assessment, and restoration activities. The Commission commends your Department for its strong leadership in these areas.

Undoubtedly, responding to the spill and assessing the resulting damages has been a considerable challenge. Furthermore, that challenge has been confounded by the large number of dolphin strandings along the Gulf's northern coast. The Commission recognizes that your Department has limited staff, resources, and facilities to respond to these events. That being said, the Commission strongly encourages your Department to devote staff and resources to response efforts. In addition to their conservation benefits, such efforts are important for maintaining the health of the Gulf ecosystem that, in turn, is vital to the state's tourism industry.

The Commission has recommended that the National Marine Fisheries Service (1) review the Gulf's stranding networks to assess their capabilities and provide a basis for expanding them; (2) seek additional funding for its Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program, Prescott Grant Program, and Unusual Mortality Event Fund; and (3) secure adequate, stable funding for marine mammal stock assessments in the Gulf. The Commission also is considering a nation-wide review of the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Program.

Given the limited resources available and the amount of work to be done, the Commission believes that the Service and Department should be working together whenever possible to accomplish their common objectives. If and when the Service reviews its Gulf stranding networks, the Commission encourages your Department to participate in that review. It should highlight opportunities to strengthen the stranding network in Mississippi through partnerships with the Service as well as various regional organizations, the academic community, and non-governmental organizations. The Commission also encourages your Department to develop a stronger partnership with the Service to address critical information gaps for bottlenose dolphins and other marine mammals in the Gulf, including impacts from oil and gas development, fisheries, coastal development, and other human activities.

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Please contact me if there is anything the Commission can do to assist your Department.
Thank you again for your leadership on these issues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Timothy J. Ragen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

Timothy J. Ragen, Ph. D.
Executive Director

cc: Jim Lecky, NMFS
Roy Crabtree, NMFS
Bonnie Ponwith, NMFS