



Marine Mammal Commission

An independent agency of the U.S. Government

Performance and Accountability Report

Fiscal Year 2015



November 2015



November 2, 2015

Message from the Chairman

With this letter, I submit the Commission's Fiscal Year 2015 (FY 2015) Performance and Accountability Report, including financial and program performance results. The performance data in this report are complete and reliable. Prior to preparation of the report, the Commission evaluated its management controls and financial management system pursuant to the Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act of 1982. No material weaknesses were identified and the financial management system conforms to government financial system requirements. In accordance with OMB Circular 123, Appendix C, no improper payments were made. An independent, certified public accountant audited the Commission's financial statements, internal controls, and management systems and verified that they conform to generally accepted accounting principles, laws, regulations, and requirements.

Given continued budgetary uncertainty and increasing needs for marine mammal research and conservation, FY 2015 was a challenge not just for the Commission, but also for the federal agencies that conduct science and bear responsibility for the conservation of marine mammals. The Commission's recommendations to federal agencies included consideration of how best to meet the mandates of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) in the face of declining financial resources. Prioritization, efficiency, and public-private partnerships are part of the ongoing strategy to address these issues.

The Commission centers all of its work around its Strategic Plan, to help focus its short and long term efforts on the most pressing issues impacting marine mammals and their environment. The Commission hopes the activities highlighted in this report will help to guide future funding decisions that enhance the effectiveness of research and management actions focused on the conservation of marine mammals and marine ecosystems. The Commission remains committed to meeting its statutory obligations under the MMPA while making the best use of available resources.

On behalf of the Marine Mammal Commission, I am pleased to submit this FY 2015 Performance and Accountability Report to the Office of Management and Budget.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Daryl J. Boness".

Daryl J. Boness, Ph.D.
Chairman

Background

Title II of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) created the Marine Mammal Commission as an independent agency of the Executive Branch. The Commission consists of three members appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. The Commission is assisted by a nine-member Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals, a special advisor on Alaskan Native affairs and 14 full-time permanent staff (Figure 1).

Section 202 of the MMPA assigned the Commission seven duties which include regular review of domestic and international actions to implement the MMPA, such as marine mammal stock assessments, regulations, management plans, policy guidance documents, and scientific research activities. The Commission is charged with making recommendations to other agencies on measures it deems necessary or desirable to further the policies of the MMPA, including provisions for protecting the interests of Indians, Aleuts, and Eskimos residing in Alaska whose livelihoods may be adversely affected by actions taken under the Act.

To fulfill its duties, the Commission reviews and makes recommendations on the domestic and international policies and actions of federal agencies to ensure that they are consistent with the MMPA. Marine mammals are subject to multiple human-related risk factors including direct and indirect fishery interactions, vessel strikes, noise, disease, contaminants, marine debris, harmful algal blooms, dead zones, coastal development, and climate change. To characterize risk factors and minimize harm to marine mammals from human activities, the Commission consults with other federal agencies, such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA, especially its National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)), the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Navy (USN) and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), state agencies (e.g., various departments of fish, game, or wildlife), and tribal organizations (e.g., the Indigenous People's Council on Marine Mammals and species/region-specific Alaska Native Organizations and the Makah Tribal Council). The Commission reviews numerous environmental analyses and applications for the incidental taking of marine mammals during military, oil and gas, geophysical, construction, and research activities. The Commission also helps develop and coordinate multi-agency and international research and management initiatives to facilitate marine mammal protection and conservation. In all its work, the Commission seeks to be a source of science based policy, to catalyze critical marine mammal research and management, and to provide independent and objective oversight for domestic and international actions that impact marine mammals and their environment.

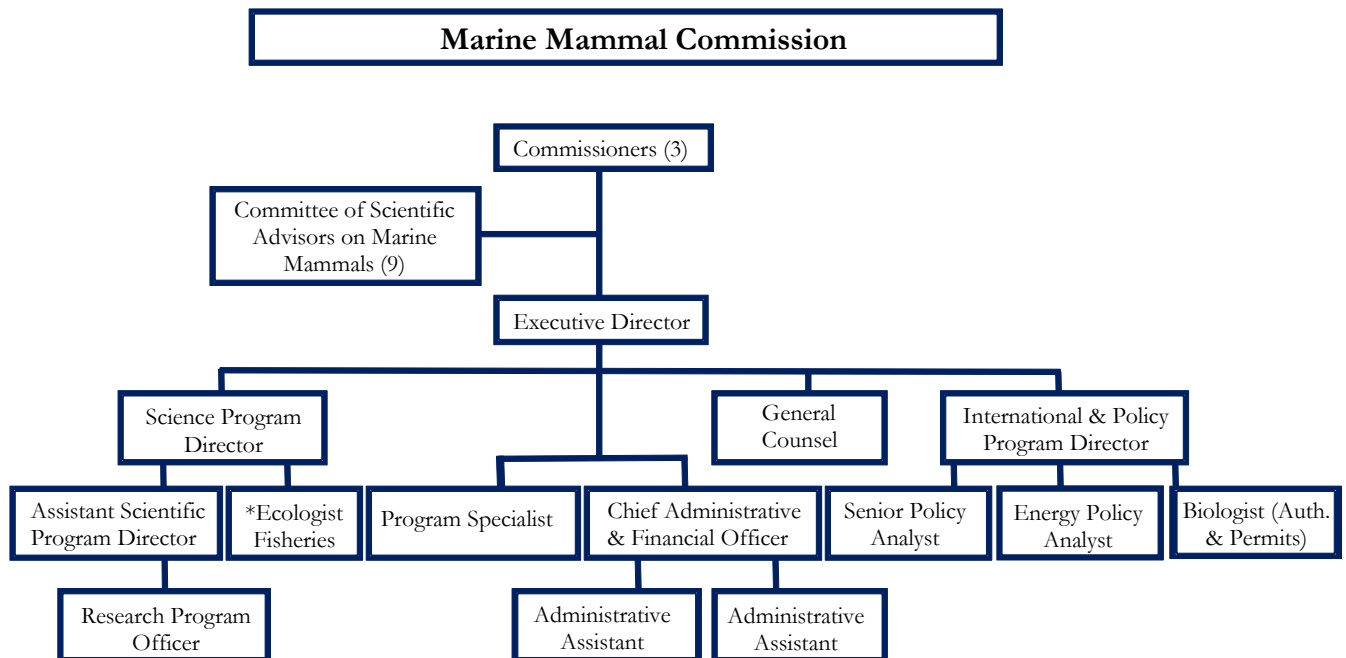
Statutory Duties

The Commission is charged with fulfilling basic statutory duties as set forth in section 202 and other sections of the MMPA, which include the following:

- (1) Reviewing all marine mammal stock assessment reports and related documents prepared by NMFS and the FWS;
- (2) Reviewing all applications for authorization to take marine mammals incidental to activities other than commercial fisheries (e.g., oil and gas development, seismic studies, military exercises, coastal development projects), as required under section 101(a)(5) of the MMPA;

- (3) Reviewing all scientific research and other permit applications involving the taking of marine mammals, as required under section 104 of the MMPA, and supporting key research projects focused on matters critical to marine mammal conservation and management;
- (4) Consulting with the Department of State, NOAA, and FWS regarding research and management measures needed to promote marine mammal conservation in foreign jurisdictions and in international waters;
- (5) Reviewing all proposals for listing, or changing the listing status, of marine mammals under the Endangered Species Act (ESA);
- (6) Enhancing and monitoring the effectiveness of recovery programs for endangered, threatened, and depleted species such as the Hawaiian monk seal, Cook Inlet beluga whale, southern resident killer whale, western Steller sea lion, North Atlantic right whale, North Pacific right whale, southern sea otter, polar bear, bearded and ringed seals, and Florida manatee;
- (7) Promoting co-management of marine mammals taken for subsistence purposes by Alaska Natives pursuant to section 119 of the MMPA, as well as effective implementation of the tribal consultation process under Executive Order 13175; and
- (8) Facilitating development of research and management capacity in foreign countries with endangered marine mammal species and stocks (e.g., vaquitas, freshwater dolphins, and Arabian Sea humpback whales).

Organization



* Position vacant

Figure 1. Organizational schematic of the Commission

Strategic Plan

The Commission's [Strategic Plan for 2015-19](#)¹ provides a vision and clear guidance for future work by the Commission. The Commission finalized its plan in February 2014, following an extensive interagency, Capitol Hill, and public review process. The plan identifies an overall strategic goal and five major strategic objectives for the Commission.

Strategic Goal: The Commission's strategic goal is to ensure the protection and conservation of marine mammals as significant functioning elements of healthy marine ecosystems through science-based mitigation and monitoring of anthropogenic impacts on marine mammal populations and their ecosystems.

Strategic Objectives: The following five strategic objectives guide the Commission's work, which includes overseeing federal agency activities, facilitating interagency and public-private collaboration, funding research, and identifying and developing agendas for the Commission's annual meetings, Capitol Hill briefings, and other Commission events.

- (1) Marine mammal populations in the Arctic are maintained as viable functioning elements of their ecosystems through management measures that address direct and indirect effects of climate change and the ensuing economic, scientific, and other activities in the region;
- (2) Scientifically robust mitigation and monitoring measures are developed, refined, and implemented in order to prevent, minimize, or mitigate the impacts of offshore oil and gas and renewable energy activities on marine mammals and their ecosystems;
- (3) Marine mammal strandings are more thoroughly investigated and analyzed to improve understanding of the factors causing mortality and affecting the health of marine mammals, determine the efficacy of measures such as ship speed reduction to reduce mortality, and elucidate the relationships between marine mammal health and human health and ecosystem services;
- (4) Anthropogenic threats to marine mammals, particularly those most vulnerable to extinction, are identified and reduced in the coastal and fresh waters of other nations and on the high seas worldwide through bilateral and multilateral scientific and conservation efforts and sharing of expertise; and
- (5) Impacts of human activities on marine mammals and their ecosystems are better understood, and the management of those impacts is improved through enhanced scientific research, policy analysis, and information dissemination.

Overview of Commission Finances in FY 2015

Annual appropriations and distribution of funds

Congress is the sole source of funding for the Commission. Total annual appropriations for the Commission from FY 2008 to 2015 are listed in Table 1.

¹ http://www.mmc.gov/reports/strategic_plans/welcome.shtml

In FY 2015 the Commission’s appropriation was \$3,340,000. Approximately 62 percent was used for salaries and benefits (including salaries for Commissioners and non-federal Committee members), 20 percent for administration and rent, 12 percent for the Science Program, and 6 percent for travel (Figure 2). Regarding salaries, approximately 81 percent were for science and policy staff, 11 percent for administrative staff and 8 percent for Commissioners and Committee members.

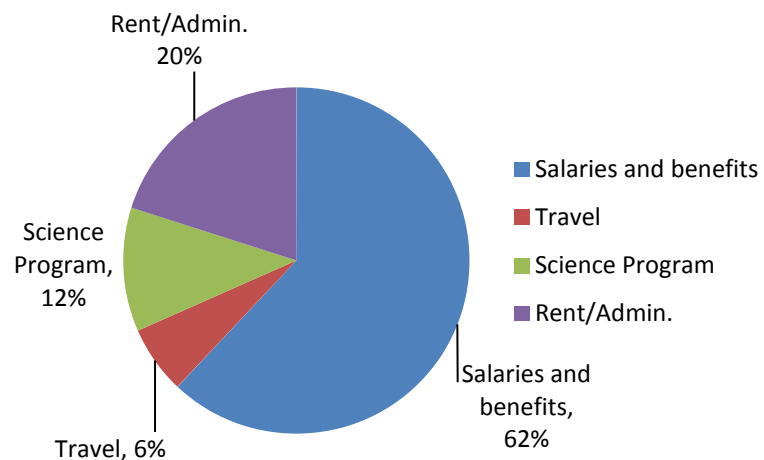
Table 1. Annual Appropriations for the Marine Mammal Commission, FY 2008 to 2015

Fiscal Year	Appropriation
2008	\$3,728,000 ²
2009	\$3,200,000
2010	\$3,250,000
2011	\$3,243,500
2012	\$3,025,000
2013	\$2,864,948 ³
2014	\$3,250,000
2015	\$3,340,000

The Commission used about 88 percent of its annual funds to meet its general oversight responsibilities (e.g., reviewing stock assessments, regulatory proposals, permits for scientific research, incidental take authorizations, matters pertaining to listing and delisting of endangered and threatened species). The remaining 12 percent was used to support marine mammal research and support workshops intended to resolve important conservation issues. The Commission used its limited research funding to catalyze new research and management initiatives through seed funding designed to encourage larger agencies to support new important, multi-agency research efforts. The 6 percent allocated to travel ensured that the Commissioners, Committee members, and staff were knowledgeable about and engaged in local, regional, national, and international issues.

Management of Commission Finances

The Executive Director oversees and assumes responsibility for all financial systems and transactions. The Chief Administrative and Financial Officer manages and is responsible for all day-to-day budgetary matters, including issuing purchase orders, processing time cards, and processing invoice payments. The Chief Administrative and Financial Officer also works with the Directors of the Science Program and the International and Policy Program to oversee their expenditures. The Staff Assistant completes all paperwork related to travel expenses and assists the Chief Administrative and Financial Officer in day-to-day management of the Commission’s budget. The Research Program Officer oversees all day-to-day fiscal transactions related to Commission-sponsored research. The Executive Director, General Counsel, Chief Administrative and



² Includes an additional \$908,000 appropriated for special projects

³ Reflects sequestration of funds.

Figure 2. Distribution of Funds Appropriated to the Marine Mammal Commission for FY 2015

Financial Officer, Scientific Program Director, and International and Policy Program Director comprise the Commission's Senior Leadership Team, which meets weekly. The Senior Leadership Team's responsibilities include budget planning and management of the Commission's finances. An independent, certified public accountant examined all financial systems and controls and completed a comprehensive audit for FY 2015. The audit did not find material internal weaknesses in financial systems and controls and found no areas where improvement was required.

Commission Accomplishments in FY 2015

The work performed by the Commission is centered on the five strategic objectives outlined in the Commission's Strategic Plan. Below is a summary of accomplishments for FY 2015 given under the respective strategic objective.

Strategic Objective 1: Marine mammal populations in the Arctic are maintained as viable functioning elements of their ecosystems through management measures that address direct and indirect effects of climate change and the ensuing economic, scientific, and other activities in the region.

- **Interagency Engagement:** The Commission continued its engagement in interagency development and implementation of federal and international strategic plans, including the Arctic Council's Circumpolar Biodiversity Monitoring Program. The Commission conducted analyses of proposed activities and provided recommendations to the responsible science and regulatory agencies on Arctic research, monitoring, and regulatory priorities, allocation of funds, and logistical support. For example, NMFS used questions generated by the Commission to guide discussions regarding Arctic marine mammal monitoring and research needs under the MMPA at its November 2014 Arctic Monitoring Strategy Meeting in Anchorage, Alaska.
- **Offshore Energy Exploration in Alaska:** The Commission provided comments to BOEM on its draft proposed leasing program for 2017-2022, which included recommendations on environmentally sensitive areas in Cook Inlet, the Chukchi Sea, and the Beaufort Sea, as well as identification of uncertainty regarding oil spill response capabilities in the Arctic. The recommendations were based on the best available science on habitat and habitat features critical for the survival of at-risk species and populations such as Cook Inlet beluga whales, bowhead whales, and Pacific walruses, as well as consideration of the protection required for areas important for subsistence hunting by Alaska Native communities.
- **Shipping Impacts on Marine Mammals:** The Commission provided comments and recommendations to the U.S. Coast Guard on route planning for new Arctic shipping lanes through the Bering Sea and Bering Strait with a view toward minimizing vessel strikes on large whales, disturbance of marine mammals, and disruption of Alaska Eskimo subsistence hunting.
- **Model Consultation Procedures:** The Commission continued its support for the development of model consultation procedures to ensure regular and meaningful consultation between federal agencies and Alaska Native communities on policies and actions that may affect the availability of marine mammals for subsistence use. The

procedures are being developed under a contract with the Environmental Law Institute, and the procedures will be finalized in advance of the Commission's 2016 annual meeting, which the Commission plans to convene in Alaska.

- 2015 Polar Bear Range States Meeting: A staff member from the Commission served on the U.S. delegation to the [September 2015 Range States meeting](#) in Ilulissat, Greenland. The most significant action taken at this meeting was adoption of a Circumpolar Action Plan to coordinate the efforts of the five Range States. The five countries also adopted an implementation plan for actions to be taken over the next two years. Since 2007, the five parties to the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears have met every two years to review implementation of the Agreement and to take actions to promote the conservation of polar bears.
- Climate Change: The Commission continued to support and encourage research to understand shifting marine mammal distributions and ecological relationships as ocean and climate conditions change in the Arctic, and is collaborating with NMFS in an effort to understand these shifts. For example, the Commission's scientific assessment of the conservation status of baleen whales (see below) paid particular attention to the question of how climate change and ocean acidification are likely to affect Arctic species.

Strategic Objective 2: Scientifically robust mitigation and monitoring measures are developed, refined, and implemented in order to prevent, minimize, or mitigate the impacts of offshore oil and gas and renewable energy activities on marine mammals and their ecosystems.

- Gulf of Mexico Research and Monitoring: In April 2015, the Commission convened a meeting of scientists, resource managers, NGOs, and industry representatives working in the Gulf of Mexico to review recent marine mammal research, identify high priority marine mammal information needs for the next 15 years and explore potential funding sources for research and monitoring. The goal of the meeting was to facilitate long-term research planning, information sharing, and capacity building in the Gulf, in coordination with emerging and existing environmental monitoring initiatives. More information about this meeting is available on the Commission website.
- 2017-2022 Draft Proposed Offshore Leasing Program: In March 2015, the Commission provided extensive comments on the BOEM Draft Proposed Program for leasing activities in 2017-2022. In keeping with its charge of helping to ensure that development of ocean energy resources is accomplished in a manner that minimizes environmental impacts, the Commission's recommendations focused on the exclusion of environmentally sensitive areas from leasing in Alaska, using a task force approach to select lease areas in the Atlantic (as was done for renewable energy siting), and developing a broad-scale, multi-year marine mammal assessment program for the Gulf of Mexico.
- Regulatory oversight: The Commission oversight responsibilities in FY15 included commenting on incidental take authorizations associated with seismic exploration and exploratory drilling in Alaska, the development of a long-term monitoring plan to assess the effects of seismic survey activities in the Gulf of Mexico, and environmental assessments of wind energy projects in the Atlantic.

- Minimizing Offshore Seismic Survey Activities: The Commission worked with industry and offshore energy regulators to explore options for reducing the number and scope of proposed seismic surveys in the Atlantic, and for minimizing unnecessarily duplicative seismic surveys in the Gulf of Mexico and Alaska. Specifically for the Gulf of Mexico, Commission staff participated on a BOEM expert panel to better define "duplicative" and propose methods for determining how BOEM determines that a proposed survey might be duplicative. Seismic surveys used in energy exploration and development can disturb and even injure marine mammals. Minimizing offshore seismic survey activity would help strike a balance between expanded energy development and the need to protect marine mammal populations.

Strategic Objective 3: Marine mammal strandings are more thoroughly investigated and analyzed to improve understanding of the factors causing mortality and affecting the health of marine mammals, determine the efficacy of measures such as ship speed reduction to reduce mortality, and elucidate the relationships between marine mammal health and human health and ecosystem services.

- Marine Mammal Health Monitoring and Analysis Platform (Marine Mammal HealthMAP): The Commission is co-leading the development of an on-line marine mammal health monitoring and analysis resource. This database of basic biological and health data, accessible via an internet portal, will provide information about marine mammal health to scientists and decision-makers across the United States. A pilot health mapping project focused on the West Coast has been completed and illustrates the potential for marine mammals to serve as indicators of marine ecosystem health on a national scale. The end goal of this project is a collaborative, user-friendly, and cost-effective platform that will facilitate the rapid dissemination of information on new diseases or altered health conditions and tracking of trends in marine mammal health and their association with environmental variables.
- Marine Mammal Health Workshop: The Commission supported a workshop in March that brought together veterinarians and pathologists to focus on development of health metrics for the monitoring and analysis platform (Marine Mammal HealthMAP) mentioned above. As of September 2015 the health categories were being used in a prototype database to be applied to the Gulf of Mexico in 2016.
- Marine Mammal Health Data Standards: The Commission initiated work on development of standards for health data through the University of Colorado Boulder and a connection to the Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS) and the U.S. Geological Survey. This will ensure greater interoperability and hence wider availability of all data in the platform.

Strategic Objective 4: Anthropogenic threats to marine mammals, particularly those most vulnerable to extinction, are identified and reduced in the coastal and fresh waters of other nations and on the high seas worldwide through bilateral and multilateral scientific and conservation efforts and sharing of expertise.

- Vaquita Conservation: The Commission continued its leading role among the federal agencies in providing technical and funding support for the conservation and recovery of the vaquita, the world's most endangered cetacean. The Commission supported research to assess the status of the species and the work of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita (CIRVA) to advise the government of Mexico on vaquita conservation measures. The Commission also continued its work with government and NGO partners to explore ways to provide the communities of the Upper Gulf of California with economically viable and socially acceptable alternatives to gillnet fishing and to identify markets for vaquita-safe products. In April 2015, in response to the recommendations of CIRVA, the President of Mexico announced significant new vaquita conservation measures. These include expansion of the protected area for vaquitas to encompass their entire range, a two-year ban on gillnets within this area, coordinated fishery inspections and surveillance, support for alternative "vaquita-safe" fishing methods, and compensation to the fishing community.
- Conservation Status of Baleen Whales: The Commission finalized a peer-reviewed scientific assessment of the global conservation status of all species of baleen whales and many of their populations. This will guide efforts by the Commission and others in addressing threats to endangered species and populations. In January 2015 the Commission sponsored a workshop that resulted in a research plan for the critically endangered population of Arabian Sea humpback whales. The Commission reviewed a proposed action to reclassify the listing of humpback whales as endangered under the ESA. The Commission also funded a request for proposals to gather information on the critically endangered eastern population of North Pacific right whales.
- International Whaling Commission: Commission staff worked within the International Whaling Commission (IWC) Scientific Committee to identify species and populations of conservation concern and establish responsive international mechanisms to identify and address threats to small cetacean populations under threat. Additionally, a Commissioner led the U.S. delegation participating in IWC's Expert Workshop on Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling. The workshop addressed issues of importance to subsistence hunters from the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission and Makah Indian Tribe.

Strategic Objective 5: Understanding of human impacts on marine mammals and their ecosystems, and the management of those impacts, is improved through enhanced scientific research, policy analysis, and information dissemination.

- Advanced Survey Technology: In collaboration with NMFS, the Commission convened workshops in October 2014 and March 2015 to evaluate NMFS's development and use of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and passive acoustics, respectively, to inform marine mammal stock assessments. The workshops identified areas for improvement, collaboration, and synergy across the six NMFS regional science centers. Surveys of marine mammal populations are crucial for assessing their conservation status, and for informing policy and management actions. However, declining budgets have increasingly limited access to traditional survey platforms (ships and planes), which has led NMFS to develop and integrate these new survey technologies into its efforts to assess marine mammal

populations. The Commission is working closely with NMFS on workshop reports and recommendations that will assist NMFS's further development and use of these tools.

- North Pacific right whales: In June 2015 the Commission announced a request for proposals (RFP) to address the lack of information on the distribution and movements of, and anthropogenic threats to, eastern North Pacific right whales—among the most endangered marine mammals in the world. Two grants were made to NOAA's Alaska Fisheries Science Center to support a ship-based visual and acoustic survey for large whales in the Gulf of Alaska, and for the analysis of acoustic data from permanent moorings in the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea. These studies will help increase our understanding of the distribution of North Pacific right whales, which is critical to this species' recovery.
- Introduction to Density Estimation using passive Acoustic data (IDEA) training: The Commission co-sponsored the IDEA training with the Navy in January 2015. The session was hosted by BOEM and led by scientists from the University of St. Andrews. Participants from the Commission, BOEM, the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, NMFS's Office of Protected Resources, Office of Science and Technology, and various Science Centers attended the training. The course included an introduction to density and abundance estimation using passive acoustic data. Numerous federal agency participants are applying the knowledge gained from the training to various ongoing projects.
- Assessment of Right Whale Ship Strike Rule: Analyses led by Commission staff and transmitted to NMFS provided scientific evidence that measures put in place by NMFS in 2008 had significantly reduced ship strike deaths of endangered North Atlantic right whales. Based on that analysis and other information, the Commission recommended that NMFS not accept a proposal to exempt key portions of the areas regulated under those measures.
- Assessment of Florida Manatee Harassment: In cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Commission reviewed alternative management strategies to prevent harassment of Florida manatees by swimmers and paddle craft in a confined warm-water spring used during winter months by up to 10 percent of the endangered Florida manatee population. Managed as part of the Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge, manatee harassment at this spring has been a longstanding and intensifying problem. The Commission recommended seasonal measures designed to accommodate public manatee viewing, while minimizing the risk of disrupting and displacing resting and nursing animals in their essential habitat.
- Economics of Marine Mammal Conservation: The Commission is expanding its scientific toolbox by exploring the potential contributions of economic analyses to understanding human impacts on marine mammals and finding solutions to human-marine mammal conflicts. Most recently, the Commission's Executive Director authored [a "Perspectives" article](#)⁴ in *Frontiers of Marine Science* on the role of economics in marine mammal science and conservation.
- Fishery Impacts on North Atlantic Right Whales: The Commission reviewed the model used by NMFS to assess North Atlantic right whale mortality in fishing gear and mitigate fishery

⁴ <http://bit.ly/114eSw7>

impacts on the population. Entanglement in fishing gear is the largest source of mortality for North Atlantic right whales and current assessments of entanglement reduction measures are based on inadequate data and a questionable model. The Commission initiated steps with NMFS to review the model with the goal of determining how to improve both the model and the data used within it.

- Take Reduction Teams: The Commission continued to participate in NMFS's marine mammal take reduction teams and provide advice on measures needed to improve the effectiveness of take reduction plans in fisheries. Incidental mortality and serious injury due to certain commercial fisheries exceed allowable levels for at least a dozen marine mammal populations in U.S. waters and this problem continues to be a major conservation challenge. Deliberations by take reduction teams spurred several new regulatory proposals from NMFS which were reviewed by the Commission.

Overarching Support for Commission's Mission

A significant portion of the Commission's work is overarching, that is, it supports multiple strategic objectives. Examples of Commission overarching FY15 accomplishments are summarized below.

- Recommendations and reviews of various agency actions: Drawing on the extensive expertise of its staff and the technical advice of its Committee of Scientific Advisors, the Commission submitted 128 letters to federal agencies and various action proponents with specific comments and recommendations aimed at enhancing protection and conservation of the affected marine mammals and promoting implementation of the MMPA and other laws. In addition, the Commission made specific recommendations on the need to minimize impacts of proposed human activities on marine mammals. Such activities included fishing, military operations, marine construction, offshore energy development (oil and gas and renewables), and research. The Commission consulted regularly with the agencies on the substance of its comments and recommendations and worked with them to pursue the best means of reducing and minimizing impacts.
- Advancing Marine Mammal Research: The Commission continued to promote new partnerships through its research grants program. In FY 2015 the Commission awarded seven grants to researchers working in the United States and overseas on a variety of projects, including investigation of immune system factors potentially contributing to unusual dolphin mortality events along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts, assessment of the potential effects of noise on reproduction in seals, and studies of threatened whale and dolphin populations in the western Indian Ocean. The grants program also supported several professional conferences and workshops. The funding allocation to this program in FY2015 totaled \$121,111. Further information on the grants awarded in FY 2015 is available on the Commission website.
- 2014 Survey of Federally Funded Marine Mammal Research and Conservation: The Commission requested data from federal agencies on their marine mammal activities in fiscal year 2014. The redesigned online survey collected information on the agencies' marine mammal-related programs, projects, and grants, including the nature of the research, the species and geographic areas studied, the threats and issues addressed, and the funding

amounts obligated. This information will help identify gaps in marine mammal research and reveal potential areas of synergy and collaboration across the federal government. The fiscal year 2014 report is undergoing review and should be published by the end of 2015.

- 2015 Annual Meeting: The Commission conducted its annual meeting May 5-7, 2015, in Charleston, SC. At the meeting, the Commission engaged with other federal agencies, stakeholders, and interested members of the public on science, policy, and management issues related to its mission to conserve marine mammals and their ecosystems. Topics for the 2015 meeting included North Atlantic right whales (fishery interactions and ship strikes), Florida manatees, human interactions with manatees and dolphins, and renewable and non-renewable offshore energy development in the Atlantic. The annual meeting agenda, presentations, and session summaries are available on the Commission website.
- 2014 Annual Report: The Commission published its 2014 Annual Report, which highlights recent accomplishments and Commission goals for 2015. The Annual Report serves as the Commission's primary outreach document, used to provide an overview of the Commission's activities and to communicate to external audiences the relevance and importance of its work. The Commission's 2014 Annual Report is available on the Commission website.
- Congressional Outreach: In March 2015, the Commission met with the Senate and House Appropriation and Authorization Committees to seek Congressional support for the FY 2016 President's Budget. Later, in June, the Commission participated in Capitol Hill Oceans Week, meeting with staff in several Congressional offices and with federal agency leadership to discuss recent activities of particular importance to the Commission.

Conclusions and Outlook

The Commission strives to ensure that marine mammal populations are conserved globally and maintained as significant functioning elements of healthy marine ecosystems for future generations, with human activities managed to minimize impacts on those populations and ecosystems. But the Commission cannot accomplish this enormous task on its own. The current and future budget prospects for the Commission and for science-based federal agencies in general require us to be more strategic about our work and increasingly to partner with other agencies and organizations to make use of external resources and expertise. The Commission's 2015-19 strategic plan (see page 4) strives to accomplish that—it provides a strategic vision and clear guidance for future work by the Commission based on the limited resources available.

In FY 2016 the Commission will continue to look for ways to reduce operational costs and leverage its resources and expertise by working with partners. For example, the Commission will continue to collaborate with industry, foundations, and NGOs to fund the participation of individuals whose attendance is critical to successful workshops and meetings. A NMFS employee has joined the Commission for a six-month detail to support multiple mission-critical projects at no cost to the Commission. The Commission also plans to continue to promote new partnerships through its research grants program to make use of the best available science developed at universities and other research institutions around the world.



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