



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

17 August 2011

Kerri-Ann Jones, Ph.D.
Assistant Secretary of State for
Oceans and International
Environmental and Scientific Affairs
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW, Room 3880
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Dr. Jones:

The Marine Mammal Commission requests your help in recovering the vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*), a small porpoise endemic to the Gulf of California. A recent study¹ suggests it numbered 245 individuals in 2008, a decline of 57 percent between 1997 and 2008. In all the world's oceans, the vaquita is the marine mammal species most likely to go extinct.² The primary threat is entanglement in gillnets set to catch shrimp and fish, primarily for U.S. markets.

At the Commission's May 2011 annual meeting, Mexican officials described their Action Plan for the Conservation of Vaquita and progress toward development of alternative fishing gear that will not kill vaquita. In recent years Mexico paid some fishermen to stop using gillnets and imposed important restrictions on others. For example, it declared a vaquita refuge and prohibited gillnet fishing within the refuge. Unfortunately, another recent study has shown that the refuge is too small and, even with perfect enforcement, it cannot protect vaquita from entanglement in gillnets deployed in surrounding areas.³

The only solution is to stop using gillnets within the vaquita's range. To do so, the fishing communities in the upper gulf would require alternative fishing gear. Experts in fishing net technology from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service) have been working with INAPESCA (Mexico's national fisheries institute) to develop and test shrimp trawls that would pose no risk to vaquita. The trawls are much like those used in U.S. waters. The Commission supports these tests, but it is not clear that the Mexican government is invested in the outcome and will require fishermen to use the new gear if the tests are successful.

Time is running out to reverse the vaquita's path to extinction and we need your help. The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the Department of State express to the Government of Mexico the following points:

¹ Gerrodette, T., B.L. Taylor, R. Swift, S. Rankin, A.M. Jaramillo-Legorreta, and L. Rojas-Bracho. 2011. A combined visual and acoustic estimate of 2008 abundance, and change in abundance since 1997, for the vaquita, *Phocoena sinus*. *Marine Mammal Science* 27:E79-E100.

² Pompa, S., P.R. Ehrlich, and G. Ceballosa. 2011. Global distribution and conservation of marine mammals. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, USA*, 10.1073/pnas.1101525108.

³ Gerrodette T, and L. Rojas-Bracho. 2011. Estimating the success of protected areas for the vaquita, *Phocoena sinus*. *Marine Mammal Science* 27:E101-E125.

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- The United States is very concerned about the conservation of the vaquita in the Upper Gulf of California and strongly supports Mexico's implementation of all elements of the Action Plan for the Conservation of Vaquita.
- The vaquita population will decline to extinction if gillnets are not removed from its entire range.
- Development of alternative fishing gear is essential to ensure that replacement of gillnets is acceptable to Mexican fishermen.
- The United States seeks Mexico's assessment of their program to design and test alternative gear and the details and timetables of efforts to get fishermen to use gear other than gillnets.
- The United States seeks advice on how it can (1) further support Mexico in developing alternative fishing gear that is practical and economically viable in the Upper Gulf of California and (2) foster a successful transition to that gear by the affected fisheries.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter. Please contact me if I can be of further assistance or provide further information.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director