



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

19 February 2014

Dr. Tammy Adams, Acting Chief
Permits and Conservation Division
Office of Protected Resources
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910-3225

Re: Request to Amend Permit No. 16109
(Versar, formerly GeoMarine, Inc.)

Dear Dr. Adams:

The Marine Mammal Commission (the 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 MMPA). Versar is seeking to amend permit 16109 that authorizes it to conduct research on marine mammals from New Jersey to North Carolina during a five-year period. The permit expires on 15 May 2017.

RECOMMENDATION

The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the National Marine Fisheries Service issue the permit amendment, provided that the current permit conditions remain in effect.

RATIONALE

Versar is authorized to conduct systematic, vessel-based line transect surveys for marine mammals in waters up to 30 m in depth from North Carolina to New Jersey. The purpose of the research is to collect baseline data on the presence, abundance, distribution, migratory patterns, and behaviors of marine mammals in areas where alternative energy development may occur. Level A harassment takes and unintentional mortalities are not authorized.

Versar is requesting four changes to its permit, including—

- (1) expanding the present survey area from New Jersey to North Carolina to Maine to Florida;
- (2) increasing its vessel surveys from quarterly to twice per month on a year-round basis;
- (3) adding aerial surveys to be conducted twice per month on a year-round basis; and
- (4) adding takes of Blainville's beaked and false killer whales.

Those changes would increase the numbers of marine mammal takes, as denoted in the application's Take Table. Aerial surveys would be flown at an altitude of approximately 229 m and would not occur over pinniped haul-out sites. To minimize impacts from aerial surveys, researchers would leave the vicinity of an animal that shows signs of disturbance. Versar also would collaborate with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Center for Coastal Studies, and Wildlife Trust to

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coordinate and refrain from duplicating data collection efforts. Therefore, the Commission recommends that the NMFS issue the permit amendment, provided that the current permit conditions remain in effect.

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

The Commission appreciates the opportunity to comment on this permit amendment application. Kindly contact me if you have any questions concerning the Commission's recommendation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Rebecca J. Lent". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R".

Rebecca J. Lent, Ph.D.
Executive Director