

**MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION**  
4340 EAST-WEST HIGHWAY, ROOM 905  
BETHESDA, MD 20814

13 February 2006

Mr. Charlie Pelizza  
Refuge Conservation Planner  
Hawaiian and Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex  
300 Ala Moana Boulevard., Room 5-231  
Box 50167  
Honolulu, HI 96850

Dear Mr. Pelizza:

The Marine Mammal Commission appreciates the update your office provided to the Commission last year regarding comprehensive conservation planning for the Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Islands National Wildlife Refuges. We realize that we are sending these comments after the closing date for public scoping but hope that they may still be useful in your planning process.

The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) refuges at Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Islands are relatively small and remote. Nevertheless, they may be important to marine mammals. Although the combined emergent land of the refuges is only about 3 sq. mi., the submerged lands under FWS jurisdiction amount to more than 150 sq. mi. Furthermore, the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the islands, in which the United States assumes responsibility for managing marine resources, comprises more than 250,000 sq. mi. of potential marine mammal habitat. To our knowledge, no surveys have been conducted for marine mammals near these islands. Studies conducted by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) elsewhere in the Pacific Islands region suggest that the waters around small islands such as these may support distinct local populations of species such as spinner dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, and short-finned pilot whales. During recent surveys in the vicinity of Palmyra and Johnston Atolls, NMFS recorded 18 marine mammal species. Many of those species also may use refuge waters at Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Islands. The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the FWS consider marine mammals in the conservation planning for the Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Island refuges, as they are important components of the associated natural ecosystems.

Before the FWS develops refuge conservation plans, the Marine Mammal Commission also recommends that it collaborate with NMFS to assemble and evaluate available information regarding the distribution, abundance, and status of marine mammals, and factors that pose threats to them in or near the three refuges. Because the available data may be insufficient to determine which species are present, the Commission recommends further that the FWS include a cooperative marine mammal research program with NMFS in its conservation plans. Such cooperation is needed to collect the basic information for managing marine mammals and other protected resources within the refuges and associated EEZ waters (e.g., which species are present). In that regard, we note that NMFS is developing a comprehensive research plan for cetaceans throughout the Pacific Islands region, which presumably will include the area around Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Islands.

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As the FWS develops its comprehensive conservation plan, it will be important to describe what human activities would be compatible with the refuge purposes of restoring and preserving the associated terrestrial and marine ecosystems, including conservation of marine mammals. Although these refuges are undeveloped, a number of potential human activities in the region could affect marine mammals. For example, commercial fishing within the refuges or EEZ could incidentally injure or kill marine mammals through gear interactions or could alter their ecosystem by removing important species. Similarly, introduction of sound into the ocean by military activities or other sources could injure marine mammals or affect their behavior. If land-based activities were to be allowed in the refuges, nearshore habitat could be altered by pollution, or human activities that could cause disturbance.

The FWS and NMFS have joint responsibility for conserving marine resources in this part of the Pacific Islands region. The comprehensive conservation plan should describe the relevant management authorities and jurisdictions and highlight means of cooperation among agencies. The plan should strive to ensure consistency among FWS and NMFS research activities and management regulations. To foster such cooperation and consistency, the Marine Mammal Commission encourages the FWS to consult with NMFS to ensure that the conservation plan developed for Howland, Baker, and Jarvis Islands provides the best possible protection for marine mammals within and surrounding these refuges. In particular, we suggest that you contact Chris Yates at the NMFS Pacific Islands Regional Office, Sam Pooley, Bud Antonelis, or Dave Johnston at the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, and Jay Barlow at the Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

The Commission looks forward to helping the FWS throughout the comprehensive conservation planning process, and we would appreciate receiving any future updates regarding the process.

Sincerely,



David Cottingham  
Executive Director

cc: George A. Antonelis, Jr., Ph.D.  
Jay Barlow, Ph.D.  
Mr. David N. Johnston  
Mr. Don Palawski  
Samuel Pooley, Ph.D.  
Mr. Chris E. Yates