

**Marine Mammal Commission 2017 Annual Meeting
April 5-7, 2017, North Falmouth, Massachusetts**

Vaquita Session Summary

Fewer than 30 vaquitas likely remain in the northern Gulf of California, Mexico, according to visual and acoustic monitoring surveys in 2015 and 2016. Commissioner Frances Gulland, Scientific Advisor Randy Wells, Executive Director Rebecca Lent, and International and Policy Program Director Peter Thomas reported on the continued threat to this species from illegal gillnet fishing for totoaba and on international efforts to influence artisanal fishing practices through policy change, economic incentives, and gear development. Enforcement efforts have been stepped up but are still insufficient, as are efforts to remove gillnet gear and develop vaquita-safe fishing methods. The general lack of security in the region has worsened, which complicates all aspects of vaquita protection. The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society continues to find and remove gillnets and provides a monitoring presence in coordination with the responsible Mexican agencies.

Alarmingly, three dead vaquitas were recovered in the first quarter of 2017. U.S. officials have made clear to their Mexican counterparts that the gillnet ban must be extended, development and deployment of alternative fishing gear expanded, and the potential markets for vaquita-safe seafood products explored. Given the dire situation, the international recovery team (CIRVA) recommended that a step-wise program be launched immediately to place some vaquitas in a temporary sanctuary with the goal of protecting them until it is possible to release vaquitas back into a gillnet-free environment. SEMARNAT, the Mexican environment agency, is working with the National Marine Mammal Foundation, other institutions, and cetacean experts to design and implement a program to locate, catch, and house vaquitas with minimal risk to the animals. The first attempt at capture is planned for October 2017.