

## **MMPA Agency Briefing**

Good afternoon, I am Peter Thomas, Executive Director of the Marine Mammal Commission. I am pleased to join with my colleagues from the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Fifty years ago, the drafters of the Marine Mammal Protection Act had the foresight to create the Marine Mammal Commission to provide independent oversight of the Act's implementation. Application of the Act's provisions continues to evolve as the challenges facing marine mammals and our understanding of them changes.

As envisioned by Congress, and encapsulated in Title II of the MMPA, the Commission's nimble structure, independence, scientific expertise, and specific focus have made it an effective and respected advocate for marine mammals and achieving the goals of the Act.

Our three Commissioners are presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed. They are supported by a small staff and nine-member Committee of Scientific Advisors – all experts in marine ecology and marine mammal science.

Since its creation, the Commission has been a leader in building our understanding of marine mammal populations and the threats they face, and identifying appropriate responses.

We work to prevent extinction and promote the recovery of depleted species and stocks. Early on, the Commission spearheaded efforts to reduce bycatch of the hundreds of thousands of dolphins dying in tuna nets. We funded the first surveys of North Atlantic right whales in the 1970s and, more recently, efforts to develop ropeless gear for lobster and other

trap fisheries aimed at reducing right whale entanglements and avoiding new time-area closures.

The Commission works to address immediate and long-term threats to marine mammals and their ecosystems. We were among the first to call attention to the risks posed by marine debris and ocean noise. We have been studying and reporting on the effects of climate change on Arctic marine mammals for decades and are now looking at impacts on marine mammals elsewhere.

We convey independent science-based advice to help ensure that the requirements of the MMPA are met. Working with NMFS and other agencies, the Commission staff compiled the data on vessel strikes of large whales used to support the eventual adoption of speed restrictions, lanes, and other management measures to prevent them. We were deeply engaged in responding to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and continue to advocate for effective marine mammal restoration programs in the Gulf, particularly for bottlenose dolphins and Rice's whales.

The Commission has also been a leader in international efforts to conserve marine mammals. One example is the longstanding effort to persuade Mexico to enforce gillnet bans in the Gulf of California to avoid extinction of the critically endangered vaquita.

Another focus is on furthering policies that protect the interests of Alaska Natives, who rely on marine mammals for subsistence and handicraft purposes. The Commission has steered efforts to improve the co-management relationships between Alaska Native Organizations and other federal agencies.

Kim and Gary have described many of the species and issues that require our attention. The Commission is a source of independent analysis and advice to their agencies as they grapple with the suite of marine mammal challenges.

As we move forward, the Commission's goals are to:

1. Provide well-reasoned policy and legal oversight
2. Improve Population Assessment, Health Surveillance and Ecosystem Research
3. Assess and Address Threats
4. and, Engage with Stakeholders in the MMPA.

As offshore wind energy projects proliferate, the Commission is advocating for a precautionary approach that includes doing the required research and assessing the potential risks these projects pose to marine mammals, and for the development of effective mitigation and monitoring measures.

The Commission is proud to be a partner with the two Services in the successful recovery of some stocks, and in the development of science and management tools. Yet, there is more for us all to do. Fisheries bycatch remains a major source of marine mammal deaths worldwide and requires continuing attention.

Climate change poses an even larger challenge. We have an urgent need to understand and respond to its impacts on marine ecosystems and marine mammals. Among other things, we need to bolster our capacity to respond to strandings to not only care for the animals' welfare, but to gather systematic marine mammal health data to determine the extent of threats from infectious disease, harmful algal blooms, and other indirect consequences of climate change.

The Commission, since its inception, has been a resource for Congress and continues to provide up-to-date information from its independent, science-based perspective. Just pick up the phone we are here to answer your questions or provide drafting assistance!

Thank you for your attention as we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. We look forward to the next 50 years of

collaboration between our three agencies and Congress to achieve our shared goals.