



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

27 May 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: Permit Amendment Application No. 14327
(National Marine Mammal Laboratory)

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). The National Marine Mammal Laboratory (NMML) is seeking to amend permit 14327 that authorizes it to conduct research on northern fur seals in Alaska and California. The current permit expires on 31 August 2014.

NMML is authorized to conduct research on northern fur seals in Alaska, primarily on the Pribilof and Bogoslof Islands, and on San Miguel Island and the Farallon Islands in California. The research focuses on pinniped (1) population status and trends, (2) health and condition, (3) demographic parameters, and (4) foraging ecology. Authorized activities include harassing, capturing, handling, restraining, administering drugs to, measuring, weighing, marking/tagging, sampling, conducting ultrasound on, and attaching instruments to various numbers of pinnipeds. NMML is authorized to conduct the specified activities on individuals of various age classes and either sex.

NMML is requesting multiple changes to its permit, including—

- (1) adding the use of unmanned aerial surveys¹ to monitor fur seal distribution and abundance at various rookeries and haul-out sites (see the Take Tables)—harassing up to 2,100 California sea lions incidental to the surveys on San Miguel Island;
- (2) increasing the number and frequency of tag resighting observations of fur seals (see the Take Tables)—increasing the number of California sea lion incidental harassment takes by 6,500 up to 20 times per year at San Miguel Island;
- (3) adding collection of ocular, nasal, vaginal, and/or fecal swabs from fur seals at various locations for disease monitoring;
- (4) adding collection of up to two vibrissae per year from fur seals at all rookeries and haul-out sites for stable isotope analysis;

¹ Using unmanned aerial systems (UASs; primarily a hexacopter that weigh less than 2 kg) to photograph/videotape the animals.

- (5) adding the incidental harassment of up to 100 harbor seals per year in Alaska during northern fur seal research activities;
- (6) adding the use of lidocaine when extracting post-canine teeth from fur seals for pain management; and
- (7) extending the end date of the permit by five years until 2019 and editing the Take Tables, accordingly, for the date extension and biennial activities that occur on the Pribilof and Bogoslof Islands.

Researchers would monitor fur seal behavior before, during, and after unmanned aerial surveys and would not hover over the animals. If seals are disturbed during those surveys, the UAS would be flown at a higher altitude and/or greater distance from the animals—the flight would be discontinued if the adverse responses do not cease. They would also maintain low profiles, move slowly, approach downwind, and conduct resightings from behind blinds or catwalks/bluffs. In addition, researchers would avoid harassing harbor seals at the fur seal rookeries and haul-out sites by moving around them or working at other locations, when possible. NMML's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee has reviewed and approved the research protocols.

The Commission believes that the activities for which NMML has requested a permit amendment, and the efforts to minimize its impact, are consistent with the purposes and policies of the MMPA. Therefore, the Commission recommends that the National Marine Fisheries Service issue the permit amendment, provided that the current permit conditions remain in effect.

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,



Rebecca J. Lent, Ph.D.
Executive Director