MMC Annual Meeting 2019

Session Summary - Pelagic False Killer Whales

This session focused on pelagic false killer whales, which are found in oceanic waters around the Hawaiian Islands, where they interact primarily with the Hawai'i deep-set longline fishery. We learned from Dr. Erin Oleson (Cetacean Program Lead, Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, NMFS) how they regularly take bait or fish off the longline hooks, and occasionally are hooked, which can result in their death. Dr. Oleson illustrated how changes in survey techniques have made it very difficult to detect any trend in the population. Nonetheless, although twenty-five individuals are killed or seriously injured each year, inside and outside the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), that number is not sustainable. Erin pointed out that although the number of deaths and serious injuries has declined inside of the EEZ, it has increased beyond the EEZ in recent years. Satellite tagging has revealed that false killer whales are attracted to longlines from up to 100 km away. Ann Garrett (Assistant Regional Administrator, Protected Resources Division, Pacific Islands Regional Office, NMFS) described how the mitigation of this bycatch is the focus of NOAA's False Killer Whale Take Reduction Team (FKWTRT), a diverse advisory group that makes management recommendations to NMFS. A take reduction plan (TRP) implemented in 2013 aimed to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries, by requiring fishermen to use relatively weak hooks and strong branch lines, which with tension applied to the line would cause the hook to straighten releasing the whale. Unfortunately, after five years of the fleet using this gear and handling configuration, only 10% of the hooks straightened as designed. Ann described the current efforts of the TRT to require further strengthening of the lines and weakening of the hooks, and to better train the fishermen in the proper handling techniques. In addition, we learned that the TRT is considering recommending the deployment of electronic monitoring systems on longline vessels to monitor false killer whale handling performance by the captains and crews.

Following the presentations, Erin and Ann were joined by Hannah Bernard (Executive Director, Hawai' i Wildlife Fund, and TRT Member), Brendan Cummings (Conservation Director, Center for Biological Diversity, and TRT member), Eric Kingma (Executive Director, Hawai'i Longline Association), and Asuka Ishizaki (Protected Species Coordinator, Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, and TRT member) on a discussion panel. Each of the panelists affirmed their commitment to mitigating false killer whale bycatch and provided some additional perspective on the issue. Hannah and Brendan emphasized the importance of providing effective crew training, getting the hook strength right and the need for electronic monitoring. Asuka shared the Council's concern that hook straightening may not be the best mitigation approach, and their interest in pursuing techniques to cut branch lines so as to leave as little trailing gear as possible. Eric noted that what is worked out in the Hawaii fleet, hopefully can be transferred to the international longline fleets.

The fate of false killer whales released with hooks in the mouths and trailing various length of line was discussed at length. Keen interest was expressed by some panelists in conducting post-interaction survivorship studies and in having NMFS revisit its serious injury determination criteria as they apply to false killer whales. In addition, the panel discussed what is known about the impact the international fleet might be having on the whales, and Brendan noted the potential importance of having strong and

effective measures in the U.S. fleet, which could form the standard for the international fleets by the time the U.S. seafood import rule takes effect.