



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

22 October 2010

Mr. Timothy J. Van Norman
Chief, Branch of Permits
Division of Management Authority
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 North Fairfax Drive
Arlington, VA 22203

Re: Renewal and Amendment of Permit No. PRT-046081
(U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Marine Mammals
Management)

Dear Mr. Van Norman:

The Marine Mammal Commission, in consultation with its Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals, has reviewed the above-referenced permit renewal and amendment request with regard to the goals, policies, and requirements of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Permit No. PRT-046081 authorizes the permit holder to take by harassment annually up to 400 polar bears (100 in the Beaufort Sea and 300 in the Chukchi Sea) during aerial surveys and to capture (i.e., immobilize with Telazol), sample (blood, milk, tooth, and hair), biopsy sample (fat), tag (with Global Positioning System collars and radio-frequency ear tags), and release up to 100 polar bears each year. The purpose of the research is to obtain information on abundance, habitat use, reproduction, survival, and condition of polar bears in the Chukchi and Beaufort Seas.

The permit holder is requesting that the permit be renewed for an additional five years and amended to authorize the taking by harassment annually of up to (1) 20 bears by biopsy darting (i.e., animals that researchers are unable to capture); (2) 10 adult female bears and their cubs (up to 20 cubs) during surveys of maternal dens using den-detection techniques (e.g., forward-looking infrared equipment and trained dogs); and (3) 30 bears using non-lethal deterrence measures (e.g., bean bags, rubber bullets, or cracker shells fired from a shotgun) to minimize polar bear/human interactions in coastal Alaska. The permit holder also is requesting authorization to collect additional samples from and attach additional tags to captured polar bears; to descend to an elevation of 30 m (100 ft) on occasion during aerial surveys to verify sex/age class and body condition of bears; and, in rare cases, to recapture bears. Lastly, the permit holder is requesting authorization to export to Canada for analysis annually up to 100 fat biopsies and teeth collected from captured and harvested polar bears and to make changes to personnel involved in the research.

RECOMMENDATION

The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the Fish and Wildlife Service approve the permit renewal and amendment request, provided that the Service—

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- consults with the applicant to determine the number of serious injuries and deaths of animals that might occur during the proposed activities and provide authorization for a limited number of accidental deaths. The Service also should require that activities be suspended, pending review and authorization to proceed, if the mortality level reaches the authorized number;
- consults with the applicant to determine whether the harassment of non-target marine mammal species (e.g., Pacific walrus and bearded, ringed, and spotted seals) incidental to the proposed research is likely and, if so, can be avoided. If not, the applicant should provide an estimate of the number of individuals of these species that may be harassed and obtain authorization for such taking;
- ensures that activities to be conducted under this permit and those of other permit holders who might be carrying out research on the same species in the same areas are coordinated to avoid unnecessarily duplicative research and unnecessary disturbance of animals; and
- is satisfied that the proposed activities have been reviewed and approved by the permit holder's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) in accordance with sections 2.31 and 2.37 of the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's Animal Welfare Act regulations. The Commission notes that, according to the permit holder's 15 September 2010 memorandum transmitting the application, updated research protocols have been accepted by the Service's Region 7 IACUC, pending minor revision.

The Commission believes that the activities for which it has recommended approval are consistent with the purposes and policies of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Please contact me if you or your staff has any questions concerning this recommendation.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director