



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

17 November 2011

Mr. Eric C. Schwaab
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dear Mr. Schwaab:

In past letters, the Marine Mammal Commission has expressed its strong belief that actions to recover the Hawaiian monk seal should be one of our nation's highest marine mammal conservation priorities. The species is the most endangered seal in U.S. waters and one of the most endangered marine mammals in the world. Although some marine mammal populations are smaller, recovery issues in which an entire species is at risk must take precedence. Arguably, an entire genus is at risk—the Mediterranean monk seal is even more endangered than the Hawaiian species and the Caribbean monk seal was last seen in the early 1950s and has since been declared extinct.

RECOMMENDATION

The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the National Marine Fisheries Service restore funding for Hawaiian monk seal recovery efforts for FY 2012 to at least \$5.6 million—the average amount allocated annually in FY 2009 and FY 2010—and, for the foreseeable future, include at least that amount in annual line item requests for monk seal recovery work.

RATIONALE

The status and trend of the Hawaiian monk seal population over the past half century are among the best known of any of the world's pinniped species. Total abundance is about one-third of what it was at the time of the first count in 1956-57. The recent increase in numbers in the Main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) has partially compensated for the precipitous decline in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), but overall abundance has continued to decline by about 4 percent per year over the past decade.

The Revised Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan adopted by the Service in 2007 rightly proclaimed that the species was in crisis. The plan projected the costs for needed recovery activities at \$7.2 million per year. Such funding would be comparable to that provided for the North Atlantic right whale and Florida manatee, but far below that for the Steller sea lion.

Despite the clear need, the Service's budget requests and allocations consistently have been much less. From FY 2000 to FY 2006, the Service's funding for monk seal work remained essentially flat at \$2.1 to \$2.5 million per year. During that period less than \$100,000 per year was provided to the Pacific Islands Regional Office for all management activities. At that level, the Office was unable to support even one full-time staff member to work on monk seal conservation. More recent funding levels were \$2.2 and \$2.1 million in 2007 and 2008, increasing to \$5.7 and \$5.5 million in 2009 and 2010, and then declining again to \$3.6 million in 2011.

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The increases in funding for FY 2009 and 2010 can be attributed to Congressional initiatives rather than Service requests. As the Commission understands it, the Service's most recent funding requests for monk seal conservation efforts have remained at \$2.5 million per year. Although the Commission understands that the Service has directed up to \$1.5 million per year in discretionary funding in addition to its line item requests, the ongoing pattern appears to be that the Service repeatedly has requested monk seal funding levels far below projected needs. With discretionary funding being reduced in FY 2011, support for monk seal recovery efforts declined substantially. With further reductions in discretionary spending expected in FY 2012, an adequate line-item budget request for the monk seal program becomes all the more critical. The need for a line item will be even more important if the program loses its allocation of ship time needed to support annual field camps.

Increased funding in 2009 and 2010 began to provide an opportunity to plan and carry out recovery initiatives at the needed scale. They included a focused multi-year translocation of juvenile seals to sites with the best habitat to increase their survival, behavior modification of seals that are at increased risk because they haul out on popular beaches or readily interact with swimmers, and management of risks from infectious diseases. These initiatives supplement essential annual field camps in the NWHI set up to collect trend and related data while also undertaking vital recovery actions such as disentangling seals caught in debris.

The status and trend of the species clearly signal the need to develop and apply an arsenal of practical, well-developed recovery measures, and the Service must take the lead role. The variability and unpredictability in funding and other support experienced in recent years hinders the development of such measures, and continuation of this pattern could well result in the Hawaiian monk seal's extinction during our lifetime, or "on our watch." To plan for and carry out the necessary recovery actions, Service staff must be assured of a stable and minimally adequate, long-term funding commitment. This is best accomplished through a sufficient line-item request. Therefore, the Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the National Marine Fisheries Service restore funding for Hawaiian monk seal recovery efforts for FY 2012 to at least \$5.6 million—the average amount allocated annually in FY 2009 and FY 2010—and, for the foreseeable future, include at least that amount in annual line-item requests for monk seal recovery work.

Please contact me if you or your staff has questions regarding this recommendation and rationale.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director