

Marine Mammal Commission Presentation to the Advisory Council on Wildlife Trafficking

17 October 2014

I appreciate the opportunity to bring an urgent wildlife trafficking and species survival issue to the attention of the Advisory Council on Wildlife Trafficking. I am speaking on behalf of the Marine Mammal Commission, an independent agency of the U.S. government.

My testimony concerns the imminent extinction, unless immediate action is taken, of the Gulf of California porpoise or vaquita (*Phocoena sinus*), the most endangered of all cetacean species. The vaquita is undergoing a catastrophic decline as a result of entanglement and drowning in gillnets used in the illegal fishery for a large fish species, the totoaba (*Totoaba macdonaldi*), in the Upper Gulf of California, Mexico. The totoaba fishery and the illegal trafficking of this CITES Appendix I-listed species are driven by the high price and demand for totoaba swim bladders in China. Both the vaquita and the totoaba are red-listed by IUCN as Critically Endangered.

Despite decades-long efforts by the government of Mexico and the international community to reduce the threat of gillnet bycatch to the vaquita, the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita recently determined that the population is declining at the highest rate ever recorded, 18% per year, and numbers fewer than 100 individuals. The recent increase in the rate of decline is attributed to re-emergence of illegal gillnet fishing for totoaba. Vaquitas are particularly prone to bycatch in totoaba nets. These are anchored, large mesh gill nets set at night and left unattended for several days.

In 1990 the International Whaling Commission Scientific Committee identified the totoaba fishery and trade in the Upper Gulf of California, Mexico, as unsustainable for totoaba and as a severe bycatch threat to vaquitas. Mexico banned totoaba harvest and trade in the early 1990's even as the fish became commercially extinct. This alleviated some, but by no means all, gillnet bycatch risk to vaquitas. Vaquita conservation efforts since then have focused on reducing the threat of gillnets used in legal fisheries to catch shrimp and finfish.

Fisheries research indicates that the totoaba population was starting to rebound by the early 21st century following 20 years of legal protection. Unfortunately though, the markets, wildlife traffickers, and fishermen picked up the signals of recovery well ahead of the fisheries scientists and managers and a rampant illegal fishery and illegal trade re-emerged, apparently in a matter of months. This ongoing rush is being fueled by the high price and demand in Chinese markets for totoaba swim bladders. Fishermen may receive up to \$8500/kg – that would be the bladders from 2 adults - at the dock. They are used as food (in soup) in China where they are believed to have medicinal or restorative value. In one Mexican law enforcement operation, more than 500 swim bladders were recovered. In addition to endangering vaquitas, this fishery is certain to again decimate the totoaba population.

The July 2014 meeting of the International Committee for the Recovery of the Vaquita concluded that at-sea gillnet enforcement efforts had failed, and illegal fishing, especially the resurgent totoaba

fishery, had increased. It recommended that the Government of Mexico establish a gillnet exclusion zone encompassing the entire range of the vaquita and further recommended that all available enforcement tools, both within and outside Mexico, be applied to stopping illegal fishing and the trade in totoaba products.

U.S. and Mexican authorities have been cooperating at the border to curb the totoaba trade but much more needs to be done, urgently. At the International Whaling Commission Meeting last month the U.S. and Mexico committed to “consulting and coordinating” on enforcement activities to combat the illegal capture and trade of totoaba.”

We ask the Advisory Council on Wildlife Trafficking to:

- recommend continued and increased cooperation between U.S. government (Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and NMFS) and Mexican border and wildlife protection authorities to stem the trade of totoaba swim bladders across the US border.
- encourage U.S. agencies to assist Mexico in building their capacity to identify and interdict such shipments within Mexico.
- recommend that United States law enforcement, customs, and CITES officials work with both Mexican and Chinese officials to enforce the ban on international trade of the CITES Appendix I-listed totoaba.
- ask U.S. government agencies to explore all means to assist Mexican agencies in strengthening fisheries enforcement, especially to combat the illegal totoaba fishery, in the Upper Gulf of California, Mexico.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this information to the Advisory Council. We have already provided the written report of the July 2014 meeting of the International Recovery Team for Vaquita. The Marine Mammal Commission stands ready to provide further information to assist you in your deliberations.

As needed:

The U.S. has taken a number of measures to assist Mexico in addressing the problem. Among these U.S. agencies have been strong partners in development of alternative gear to hasten the transition away from gillnets. NMFS scientists have been at the forefront of developing means to monitor vaquita abundance. Efforts are underway to collaborate with Mexico on an economic summit to explore incentives and alternatives for fishermen in the Upper Gulf.