

Response: Although 16 common dolphins were killed incidental to the pelagic longline fishery between 1990–2000, no animals were killed or seriously injured during the 5-year period (1996–2000). Therefore, the data were not included in Table 2.

Pacific Regional SARs

Comment 22: For Hawaiian monk seals, the pattern of residuals in the graph showing mean number of non-pups by year suggests that the fitted model may be too linear, and other models should be investigated to provide a better fit. The title for the Y-axis overlaps the units of measurement and is difficult to read.

Response: NMFS is currently investigating other analyses to interpret the data more precisely. However, the slope of the current model provides an average rate of population decline during the entire period covered in the graph.

Comment 23: Data for population size of Hawaiian Monk Seals in 2001 are available, and it would be useful to include them in the discussion and the graph.

Response: Although the data for 2001 are currently available, the estimates resulting from these data were not completed and reviewed prior to completion of the 2002 draft SARs. The new estimates will be included in future drafts for public review and comment.

Comment 24: In the fourth paragraph in the Hawaiian monk seal section and in the section on Other Mortality, references to biotoxins (e.g., ciguateras) have been removed. Although mortality due to biotoxins has not been confirmed, it has long been a matter of concern stemming largely from (1) the 1978 mass mortality of seals at Laysan Island, which may have resulted from ciguateras, and (2) observations that monk seals consumed fish that were discarded during bottomfish operations because those fish are known to contain potentially high levels of biotoxins (i.e., were not considered fit for human consumption). The lack of confirmation that biotoxins do, in fact, cause mortality could indicate they do not, but it could also indicate that methods for detection or monitoring of such mortality are inadequate. In view of the fact that the potential threat posed to monk seals by biotoxins cannot be reliably characterized and concerns about such threats appear to be justified on the basis of the existing information on monk seals (as well as information on biotoxin effects on other marine mammal species), this potential source of mortality should be described in the report.

Response: The role of biotoxins, such as ciguateras, in mortality of monk seals remains speculative. Any number of other factors could also be hypothesized to cause mortality to monk seals, but are not listed because they are not confirmed. As relevant information becomes available, NMFS will include a summary of this information in the SARs, including the effects of biotoxins on monk seals.

Comment 25: In the Fisheries Information section, there was confusion over the total number of sets and hooks fished in Hawaiian waters.

Response: Two sets of values were presented: one for Hawaii-based vessels and another for vessels landing on the U.S. west coast (excluding Alaska and Hawaii). The reported value of 20.2 million hooks fished in 2000 refers to Hawaiian-based vessels, which corresponds to approximately 12,000 fishing trips, or 1,700 hooks per set. The cited value of 285 sets in year 2000 refers to boats landing on the continental U.S. west coast. Information on the number of Hawaiian-based sets will be clarified in the final stock assessment.

Comment 26: The commenter noted that the abundance of false killer whales in regions yet unsurveyed is unknown, nor has their presence been established in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The commenter also suggested that it might be more accurate to state that current estimates are negatively biased, with the extent of the potential bias being unknown.

Response: The abundance of Hawaiian false killer whales outside of previously surveyed areas is unknown, but their presence has been documented through longline fishery interactions. Given even a low density of animals outside previously surveyed areas and the large expanse of the study area, new population estimates are likely to exceed the currently published estimate by an unknown amount. Thus the current aerial survey estimate represents an underestimate, owing to a lack of survey coverage throughout the stock's range. Current abundance estimates are also negatively-biased because correction factors for the proportion of animals missed by the survey aircraft due to diving (availability bias) and poor searching conditions (perception bias) are not available. A research cruise conducted in summer and autumn 2002 in the Hawaiian EEZ is expected to provide reliable estimates of abundance of false killer whales throughout the Hawaiian EEZ. Revised abundances estimates for Hawaiian cetaceans are expected to appear in the 2004 SARs, which will be reviewed by the Pacific

SRG in late summer and fall of 2003 prior to public review and comment.

Comment 27: In Table 1 of the Fisheries Information section for harbor porpoise (Oregon/Washington coastal stock), estimates of mean annual take have not been included even though estimated mortality levels are included and, in most cases, are not zero. Although the observed mortality was recorded during experiments with pingers, it is not clear why the resulting take levels are not carried over into the final column.

Response: The mean annual take is included in Table 1 and is calculated as the average of the most recent 5 years of mortality estimates. The mean annual take of 9 (CV=0.62) harbor porpoise, calculated for the northern Washington marine set gillnet fishery in 1996–2000, includes mortality estimates for two of the years (1996 and 1997) in which acoustic alarm experiments were conducted in this fishery.

Dated: April 7, 2003.

Laurie K. Allen,

*Acting Director, Office of Protected Resources,
National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[I.D. 040903A]

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of public meeting.

SUMMARY: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council will convene a joint public meeting via conference call of the Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) and Reef Fish Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).

DATES: The meeting will be via conference call on April 28, 2003 beginning at 10 a.m. EDT.

ADDRESSES: Listening stations will be available at the following locations:

1. NMFS Southeast Regional Office, 9721 Executive Center Drive, North, St. Petersburg, FL 33702, Contact: Larry Kelley at 727–570–5301;
2. NMFS Panama City Laboratory, 3500 Delwood Beach Road, Panama City, FL, Contact: Gary Fitzhugh at 850–234–6541, extension 214.

Council address: Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 3018 U.S.