

postmarked by the submission deadline will be screened to ensure that they: were postmarked by the due date (see DATES); include one original and 2 signed copies of the entire application package; include the correct OMB forms (424, 424A or 424D, and 424B) signed and dated (see section III.A and III.B of this document); identify a Principal Investigator and provide current resumes or curricula vitae for both the Principal and Co-Investigators (see section III.C); identify one of the 9 project categories (see section II); include application package elements 1 through 6 (see section III.C); and include MMPA or ESA permit application cover letters, and other environmental documentation, if applicable. Applications that pass this initial screening will be pooled based on the application category (*i.e.*, Categories 1–9) identified by the applicant.

Our ability to pre-screen is dependent upon the submission deadline and the availability of resources.

B. Peer Review

After initial screening, a team of reviewers will be asked to independently evaluate applications in the reviewers' specific area of expertise for technical soundness and feasibility, and for relevance to the overall goals of the RWGP. The review results will be used to numerically rank the applications and provide comments on the technical aspects and Program relevance of each application.

The Program category and proposed activities of each application will be used in selecting the most appropriate technical reviewers. Reviewers will include private and public sector experts by application category, and will include (but not necessarily be limited to) experts from fields such as marine mammal biology, conservation biology, population biology, reproductive biology, telemetry, modeling, genetics, statistics, marine ecology, oceanography, toxicology, veterinary medicine, pathology, marine affairs, fisheries biology, fisheries management, and marine mammal management. Each technical reviewer will be required to certify that they do not have a conflict of interest concerning the application(s) they are reviewing prior to their review.

To determine the technical soundness and feasibility of each application, and its relevance to the RWGP goals, the reviewers will provide an independent review using the weighted criteria outlined in Section IV.C. below. Each application will be reviewed by at least three reviewers. No consensus advice will be given by the reviewers. On a

scale of 0–100, the reviewers will score the application in each criterion. An average, weighted score will be generated from each review using the numeric score per criteria and the weights assigned to each criteria.

C. Review Criteria

1. Soundness of Project Goals, Objectives, and Activities

Applications will be evaluated on clear identification of project goals and objectives and the ability to link those goals and objectives to project activities and the applicability of the project's goals and objectives to the RWGP goals. Reviewers should consider: the likelihood of meeting milestones and achieving anticipated results in the time line specified in the statement of work; the sufficiency of information to evaluate the project technically; if such information is sufficient, the strengths and/or weaknesses of the technical design relative to securing productive results; and if data collection is proposed, the inclusion of quality assurance considerations. the contribution of potential outcomes, results, or products to North Atlantic right whale biology and management; and, the amount of collaboration with other researchers in the right whale field. (Score = 1–50; Weight = 50 percent)

2. Adequacy of Project Management

The management of the project will be evaluated based on documentation of previous related experience and qualifications of the project's Principal Investigator, Co-investigator(s) and other personnel, including designated contractors, consultants, and Cooperators. Consideration will be made to previous awards received by the Principal Investigator and outcomes, results, or products (notably peer-reviewed scientific publications) resulting from such awards. (Score = 1–25; Weight = 25 percent)

3. Identification and Suitability of Project Performance Evaluation Methods

Applications will be scored based on their clear identification of performance evaluation methods and the suitability of those methods for evaluating the success or failure of the project in terms of meeting its original goals and objectives. (Score = 1–10; Weight = 10 percent)

4. Justification, Clarity, and Allocation of Project Costs

The proposed costs and overall budget of the project will be evaluated in terms of the work proposed. The

itemized costs and the overall budget must be justified and allocated appropriately. (Score = 1–15; Weight = 15 percent)

Applicants proposing activities that may require an environmental assessment under NEPA must include sufficient environmental analyses to allow program staff to determine whether or not the proposal can be categorically excluded from further NEPA analysis. If insufficient documentation is provided or if proposals cannot be categorically excluded from NEPA review, the applicant will be notified after peer review that further information or an environmental assessment is necessary. Further documentation must be supplied immediately and the environmental assessments must be completed in time prior to the final consideration for funding.

After applications have undergone peer review, NMFS Protected Species staff will summarize panel rankings by averaging the scores and prepare recommendations for funding to the Selecting Official (*i.e.* the Science and Research Director (SRD), Northeast Fisheries Science Center). Only those applications having an average weighted score higher than 60 points in the peer review will be considered for funding.

In making recommendations to the Selecting Official, NMFS Protected Species staff generally recommend proposals in numerical rank order. They may make recommendations out of numerical rank order based upon a determination that the proposal satisfies one or more of the following factors: the potential value of the work to Program goals, NEPA review, and duplication with other federally funded or permitted projects.

D. Final Selection Procedures

The Selecting Official may reject the recommendation for any proposal selected out of numerical order or accept the recommendation as submitted. If the recommendation is rejected, the Selecting Official will provide a rationale for his/her selection based on the potential value of the work to Program goals, the NEPA review, and duplication with other federally funded or permitted projects. As a result, funding may not necessarily be given to applications which receive the highest rankings in the peer review process.

E. Project Funding

The final, exact amount of funds, the scope of work, and terms and conditions of a successful award will be determined in pre-award negotiations between the applicant and NOAA/