



Southeast Alaska Harbor Porpoise: Listing of the Southern Southeast Stock as a “Strategic” Stock

ADF&G Summary Information for SEAK Gillnet Task Force

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The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) split Southeast Alaska harbor porpoises into 3 separate stocks and listed Southern-Southeast Alaska (S-SEAK) stock as a “strategic.” With current estimates of bycatch, the S-SEAK stock is over the current Potential Biological Removal (PBR) level, meaning that the level of bycatch has the potential to deplete the population. This triggered a reclassification of the SEAK gillnet fishery from a Category II to a Category I Fishery and will eventually result in the initiation of a Take Reduction Team to reduce bycatch of harbor porpoises.

Implications of a Category I Fishery

A fishery is classified at Category I if it has frequent likelihood of incidental mortality and serious injury of marine mammals (50 percent or more of the PBR level). The full list of Requirements for Category I Fisheries can be found here <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-50/chapter-II/subchapter-C/part-229/subpart-A/section-229.4>

To participate in a Category I Fishery, vessel owners must register with NMFS to obtain a Certificate of Authorization annually. Bycatch of marine mammal must be reported and properly disposed. Vessels must comply with the Take Reduction Team, observers, other monitoring, and deterrence provision requirements.

Where do we go from here?

We need better data. Additional information relating to the abundance, stock structure, and level of bycatch will help us evaluate the situation and understand whether current levels of bycatch are sustainable. ADF&G has been engaged at every stage of this process once the draft split was announced and will continue to be engaged.

Regional Harbor Porpoise Abundance Data

ADF&G is actively developing plans for research and monitoring of harbor porpoise. Aerial surveys paired with vessel surveys will enhance our understanding of the distribution and abundance of harbor porpoise in SEAK. This includes plans to collect more genetic samples in areas where the stocks overlap to provide better data on the degree of genetic separation between populations.

Drift Gillnet Fishery Interactions

Interactions are best documented with a well-planned observer program. The State, in close coordination with USAG and SEAFA, is actively working with NMFS to design a bycatch monitoring program. The program, along with the research initiatives described above will provide us with data that can be used to change the fishery listing. We support the Alaska Marine Mammal Observer Program as a means of getting better quality and more representative data and encourage cooperation from the fleet.

What is a Take Reduction Team?

A Take Reduction Team is convened to help recover and prevent the depletion of a strategic marine mammal stock that interacts with Category I Fishery. The team develops a take reduction plan. Teams consist of a balance of representatives from the fishing industry, fishery management councils, state and federal resource management agencies, scientific community, and environmental conservation organizations.

Take Reduction Plan

The immediate goal of take reduction plans is to reduce, within six months of its implementation, the incidental mortality or serious injury of marine mammals from commercial fishing to less than the PBR level. The long-term goal is to reduce, within 5 years of its implementation, the incidental mortality and serious injury mortality of marine mammals from commercial fishing operations to insignificant levels, approaching a zero mortality and serious injury rate, taking into account the economics of the fishery, the availability of existing technology, and existing state or regional fishery management plans.

Process

Once a Team is established (and noticed in the Federal Register), the Team has 6 months to reach consensus on a Plan and then submit it to NMFS. NMFS then has 60 days to publish a draft Plan, including any proposed changes to the plan. The public then has an opportunity to review and provide comments on both the Plan and the proposed regulations for implementing the Plan.

If a Team cannot reach consensus on a draft plan, the Team can document the range of possibilities considered and both majority and minority views. If a Team does not submit a draft Plan, NMFS has 8 months from the date the Team was formed to develop a proposed Plan and implementing regulations. NMFS may use the Team's deliberations as the basis for a Plan.

After the close of the comment period on a proposed Plan and implementing regulations, NMFS has 60 days to publish a final Plan and final regulations to implement that Plan. After a Plan is finalized, the Team and NMFS meet periodically to monitor implementation of the plan.

Biology and Background

The harbor porpoise is a small cetacean that is distributed throughout waters off Alaska. Movement of harbor porpoise is believed to be localized, with restricted movement patterns observed over large geographic areas and limited breeding between stocks or regions. Harbor porpoise typically inhabit shallow waters that are less than 100 meters deep and are frequently observed within 10 kilometers of shore. As such, there is overlap between harbor porpoise and fisheries operations. If incidental takes occur within a relatively small area, disproportionately affecting one stock, this may result in restrictions or additional management on fisheries.

Proposed stock	Abundance estimate	Allowable Potential Biological Removal (PBR)/yr	Estimated human-caused mortality/serious injury/yr
N-SEAK Inland	1619 porpoises	13 porpoises	5.6 porpoises
S-SEAK Inland	890 porpoises	6.1 porpoises	7.4 porpoises
Yakutat/SEAK Offshore	Not available	Undetermined	22.2 porpoises

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the NMFS manages harbor porpoise. NMFS is required to publish regular stock assessment reports (SARs). In the latest SAR, NMFS revised the stock structure for the SEAK stock of harbor porpoise. Specifically, this once single unit is now split into three stocks: 1) the Northern (N)- SEAK inland waters stock; 2) the S-SEAK inland waters stocks; and 3) the Yakutat and SEAK offshore waters stock. The proposed stock split was based upon observed trends in harbor porpoise abundance over time, perceived geographic areas in SEAK where few to no porpoises were consistently seen, and results from eDNA genetic analysis. ADF&G continues to disagree with the scientific justification underpinning the stock split.

Each stock assessment includes information such as the stock's geographic range, population abundance estimate, allowable removal levels, and estimates of annual human-caused mortality. NMFS estimated that the human-caused mortality/serious injury estimate of the S-SEAK Inland stock from bycatch in the gillnet fishery bycatch exceeds the Potential Biological Removal (PBR) level (the number of animals that may be removed from a stock due to human activity [not natural death] while allowing that stock to healthily persist into the future).