



B8 Protected Species Report

February 2021 Council Meeting

Action Memo

Council Staff: Steve MacLean
Action Required: 1. Review report

Marine Mammal Status Update to SSC

In December 2017, the SSC requested that NMFS provide updates on marine mammals for which there are conservation concerns or for which there are unusual or unexpected results from surveys or other research activities. Staff from the AFSC Marine Mammal Laboratory, NMFS AKR, and a co-manager from the Aleut Community of St. Paul are present to provide information to the SSC only about marine mammal conservation status and management activities in Alaska.

Ice Seal proposed Critical Habitat

On January 8, 2021, NMFS published a revised proposed rule to designate Critical Habitat in the northern Bering, Chukchi and Beaufort Seas for the threatened Arctic ringed seal and a proposed rule to designate Critical Habitat for the threatened Beringia population of bearded seal. The public comment period is open through March 9, 2021. The proposed rules are summarized in the NMFS B2 report.

Eastern North Pacific gray whales

In January 2021, NMFS published a population assessment ([NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFSC-639](#)) of eastern North Pacific gray whales (*Eschrichtius robustus*) in 2019/2020. The Southwest Fisheries Science Center regularly conducts shore-based surveys of eastern North Pacific gray whales from central California between December and February during the whales' southward migration. This continues a time series of estimates that began in 1967. Surveys have indicated an increasing trend in ENP gray whales abundance, with the survey from 2016 (26,960) indicating that the population has roughly doubled since 1967. The estimate from 2019/220 (20,580) is roughly a 24% decline since 2016. The decline coincides with an ongoing Unusual Mortality Event (UME) that NOAA declared in 2019 when gray whales were stranding in greater numbers than expected along the west coast. The declines are similar to the last gray whale UME in 1999 and 2000, when the population declined 23% before recovering to greater numbers than before. Researchers wrote that the continuing change in ENP gray whale abundance suggests that large-scale fluctuations like this are not rare and appear to represent short-term events that have not resulted in detectible long-term impacts on the population.

A recent paper in Marine Ecology Progress Series (Christiansen et al. 2021, <https://www.int-res.com/abstracts/meps/v658/p237-252/>) reports that 384 ENP gray whales were found dead along the Pacific coasts of Mexico, USA, and Canada in 2019-2020. Photogrammetry performed by unmanned aerial vehicles found that body condition of gray whales in 2018 and 2019 was significantly lower than in 2017. The authors suggest that the lower body condition in 2018-2019 is unlikely to have affected individual whales' survival, but could have reduced their reproductive rate by prolonging the post-weaning recovery time.