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Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions

This is the final newsletter for the Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) for Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions. The purpose of this newsletter is to provide an overview of important information about the Final PEIS.

Availability of Final PEIS and Record of Decision

The Final PEIS for Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Actions is available on the PEIS project web site at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/eis/hawaiianmonkseal.htm>. This Final PEIS provides decision-makers and the public with an evaluation of the environmental, social, and economic effects of funding, permitting, and conducting research and enhancement activities identified in the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan with the goal of conserving and recovering the species. NOAA Fisheries will publish a Notice of Availability in the Federal Register announcing a 30-day public comment period for the Final PEIS. The Notice, where to review paper copies, and instructions on how to provide comments on the Final PEIS will be provided on the PEIS project web site. While NOAA Fisheries is not required to respond to comments received in response to the Final PEIS, we will review and consider them prior to issuing a record of decision (ROD). The ROD will include information on the alternatives considered, the preferred alternative and why we chose it, and required mitigation and monitoring. The ROD will be available on the PEIS project web site after the close of the Final PEIS comment period.

Public Involvement in PEIS Development

NOAA Fisheries initiated public scoping for the PEIS on October 1, 2010 (75 FR 60721). We requested public participation in the scoping process and presented information to stimulate public discussion, such as the purpose and need for Hawaiian monk seal recovery actions and preliminary alternatives. Six public scoping meetings (on five islands) were held and an agency scoping meeting was convened on Oahu. Scoping comments were summarized in the *Scoping Report* that was included as Appendix B of the Draft PEIS.

The *Draft PEIS* was made available for public comment from August 19, 2011 to October 17, 2011 (76 FR 51945). Six public hearings (on five islands) and an agency meeting on Oahu were held regarding the Draft PEIS. In addition, NOAA Fisheries held numerous “talk story sessions” with government partners, stakeholders, and community members on all populated islands (except Niihau) to provide information and answer questions regarding the need for, and potential impacts of, the proposed actions. A total of 341 comment submissions were received from agencies and the public on the Draft PEIS. Substantive comments received during the public comment process raised issues that have been addressed and incorporated throughout the Final PEIS. A Comment Analysis Report is included as Appendix C to the Final PEIS. The Comment Analysis

Report provides responses to issues raised in comments and also refers to specific sections of the Final PEIS where additional information can be found or where changes to the document have been made after consideration of public comments.

Preferred Alternative

Three action alternatives (Alternatives 1, 3 and 4) and a “no action” alternative (Alternative 2) were developed and analyzed, and descriptions of these are presented in Chapter 2 of the Final PEIS. Alternative 1 (Status Quo) would allow for current monk seal research and enhancement to continue in the future, but no new or expanded activities could occur. Under Alternative 2 (No Action), research and enhancement carried out by the NOAA Fisheries Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program would stop after the current permit expires in June 2014. ***Alternative 3 (Limited Translocation) has been selected as the Preferred Alternative in the Final PEIS.*** Alternative 3 encompasses a broad scope of activities such as Hawaiian monk seal population monitoring, health and foraging research, mitigating entanglement in marine debris, mitigating adult male aggression, vaccinating seals to prevent or slow the spread of infectious disease outbreaks, developing seal behavioral modification techniques to mitigate undesirable human-seal interactions, and translocating seals to improve juvenile survival, including two-stage translocations. Translocations are a type of recovery action that involves moving monk seals from one location to another for the purpose of increasing seal survival and mitigating negative human-seal interactions. The Preferred Alternative (***Alternative 3***) in the Final PEIS includes several types of monk seal translocations, including moving seals within the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), within the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI), and from the MHI to the NWHI. However, ***Alternative 3 (Preferred) does not include any translocation option that would involve taking seals born in the NWHI and releasing them in the MHI.***

It is important to note that while Alternative 4 (Enhanced Implementation) was preferred in the Draft PEIS, Alternative 3 (Limited Translocation) has been selected as the Preferred Alternative in the Final PEIS. The distinction between these two alternatives is that Alternative 3 (Preferred) ***does not*** include the two-stage translocation option that involves temporarily relocating young (primarily female) seals from the NWHI (where juvenile seal survival is low) to the MHI (where juvenile seal survival is high) and then subsequently moving the seals back to the NWHI when they are near adult reproductive age and their survival chances in the NWHI increase substantially. Two-stage translocation from the NWHI to the MHI under Alternative 4 would allow for maximal flexibility to take advantage of potential benefits because weaned pups could be moved to wherever their survival chances are best. However, implementing two-stage translocation from the NWHI to the MHI is not feasible at this time. While not expected to occur frequently, NWHI pups, once brought to the MHI, could become involved in fishery and other human interactions, just as has occurred among some seals born in the MHI. NMFS believes that it must further develop program capacity, and techniques for monitoring translocated seals and intervening to prevent and mitigate such interactions (e.g., seal behavior modification techniques) before this type of two-stage translocation



can be effectively conducted. Developing these effective monitoring and intervention techniques is a significant part of the Preferred Alternative (Alternative 3). Thus, Alternative 3 (Limited Translocation) is the Preferred Alternative in the Final PEIS.

Anticipated Effects

The direct and indirect effects (environmental consequences or impacts) were analyzed in the Final PEIS for each alternative. The effects (both beneficial and adverse) of each alternative on a range of biological and socio-economic resources were analyzed and categorized on a scale ranging from negligible through major. Each alternative was also evaluated to determine its contribution to cumulative effects on each resource. Detailed analyses and discussions of these effects are presented in Chapter 4 of the Final PEIS.

Biological Resources

Among the biological resources, effects on sea turtles, cetaceans, corals, and fish species were found to be negligible for all alternatives. Effects on birds and invasive species ranged from negligible to minor adverse and were identical for Alternatives 1, 3 and 4. Under Alternative 2 (no action), effects on birds and invasive species were found to be negligible.

Socio-Economic Resources

Among socio-economic resources, effects on fishing (commercial, subsistence and recreational), environmental justice (e.g., disproportionate negative effects of the proposed actions on certain social, ethnic, or economic groups more than others), and military resources were determined to be negligible for all alternatives. Regarding effects on fisheries, the Final PEIS draws on a recent study ([Sprague et al. 2013](#)) regarding the estimated consumption of prey by monk seals compared to available prey biomass, prey consumption by other apex predators, and commercial and non-commercial fisheries landings. This research indicates that the current naturally-occurring (baseline) population of approximately 200 monk seals in the MHI consumes a maximum of 0.009% of the estimated available prey biomass. Also, the current population of apex predatory fish (e.g., sharks and ulua) in the MHI likely consume over 50 times more prey than the monk seal population. The effects determination in the final PEIS assesses whether the proposed monk seal research and recovery activities would significantly change the baseline state. Considering the Sprague et al. study and other research findings presented in this PEIS, the analysis concluded that the proposed activities would have negligible effects on fisheries for all alternatives.



Regarding recreation and tourism, the analysis indicates effects would be negligible for Alternatives 1 and 2, but were moderately beneficial for Alternative 3 (preferred alternative) and 4. The latter result was due to potentially increased wildlife viewing alternatives coupled with reduced negative human-seal interactions as a result of seal behavioral modification and translocation of seals that may become socialized to people.

Hawaiian Monk Seals

The greatest distinction among the alternatives was their effects on the Hawaiian monk seal, the subject of the proposed research and enhancement activities. Three types of effects on Hawaiian monk seals were analyzed for each alternative: 1) effects on mortality, 2) effects on reproduction, and 3) contributions to conservation objectives. Under Alternative 1, status quo activities would continue to make moderate beneficial contributions, but not at a level that would be expected to make significant progress toward recovery. Alternative 2 would clearly lead to major adverse effects on conservation, because nearly all research and enhancement activities would cease after 2014. The broader scope of research and enhancement under Alternatives 3 and 4 led to both being categorized as resulting in major beneficial effects for

conservation and recovery of Hawaiian monk seals.

Cultural Resources and Historic Properties

Effects on cultural resources and historic properties were deemed minor adverse to negligible and were identical for the action alternatives (1, 3, and 4), and negligible for the no action alternative (2). The anticipated effects to cultural resources and historic properties and associated mitigation and avoidance measures are presented in detail in Appendix B (National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 Report) and Appendix K (Cultural Impact Analysis) of the Final PEIS. Measures intended to mitigate and/or avoid the potential minor adverse impacts associated with the Preferred Alternative are summarized below.

Mitigating and Avoiding Potential Impacts to Cultural Resources and Historic Properties

NOAA Fisheries intends to implement mitigation measures (described in Chapter 5 of the Final PEIS) that are specifically designed to mitigate and/or avoid potential adverse impacts to historic and cultural properties. This includes coordination with the Hawaii State Historic Preservation Division (SHPD) to avoid impacting known historic properties and providing training to program personnel in the recognition and avoidance of archaeological and cultural sites. NOAA Fisheries will also consult with appropriate cultural experts and other advisors to further develop procedures for removing Hawaiian monk seals if they enter Hawaiian fishponds. In addition, in the NWHI, NOAA Fisheries will comply with regulations requiring permittees to attend a cultural briefing on the significance of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument resources to Native Hawaiians. We will also comply with all prohibitions against the disturbance of any cultural or historic property in the Monument.

Coordination with Stakeholders and Communities

NOAA Fisheries intends to further develop and maintain close coordination with key stakeholders, community members, and partners to facilitate implementation of Alternative 3 (Preferred). Ocean-oriented stakeholders and community members, such as fishers, surfers, Native Hawaiian practitioners, coastal property managers, and beach-goers are among those most likely to encounter monk seals or most likely to have unique knowledge or experience that would be useful for successful implementation of the proposed activities. Government and non-government organizations have been, and will continue to be, essential partners in successful recovery action implementation.

Chapter 5 of the Final PEIS summarizes community-based programs and activities that NOAA Fisheries has or will support to the maximum extent possible and discusses how such programs and activities could facilitate implementation of the proposed recovery actions. These programs and activities include:

- Overseeing the Hawaii Marine Mammal Response Network to facilitate incident response and mitigation of human-seal interactions.
- Convening a new Hawaiian monk seal recovery team to support implementation of the revised recovery plan and Final PEIS preferred alternative.
- Developing a MHI Monk Seal Management Plan to address management issues specific to the main islands.
- Providing partnership grants for activities related to Hawaiian monk seal recovery.

To support the activities proposed in Alternative 3 (Preferred), community coordination will continue with extensive two-way communication and information sharing between NOAA Fisheries and key stakeholders and community members. This will be facilitated by continuing and expanding programs such as those listed above that involve participatory planning and implementation, education and outreach, and other interactive activities.

