



## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XD610]

#### **Taking and Importing Marine Mammals; Taking Marine Mammals Incidental to Geophysical Surveys Related to Oil and Gas Activities in the Gulf of Mexico**

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

**ACTION:** Notice of modification to expiration date of letter of authorization.

**SUMMARY:** In accordance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), as amended, its implementing regulations, and NMFS' MMPA Regulations for Taking Marine Mammals Incidental to Geophysical Surveys Related to Oil and Gas Activities in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM), notification is hereby given that NMFS has modified the expiration date of a Letter of Authorization (LOA) issued to LLOG Exploration Offshore, L.L.C. (LLOG) for the take of marine mammals incidental to geophysical survey activity in the GOM.

**DATES:** This LOA is effective through December 31, 2026.

**ADDRESSES:** The LOA, LOA request, and supporting documentation are available online at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/marine-mammal-protection/issued-letters-authorization-oil-and-gas-industry-geophysical-survey>. In case of problems accessing these documents, please call the contact listed below (**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**).

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Jenna Harlacher, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, (301) 427-8401.

#### **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**

##### **Background**

Sections 101(a)(5)(A) and (D) of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*) direct the Secretary of Commerce to allow, upon request, the incidental, but not intentional, taking of small numbers of marine mammals by U.S. citizens who engage in a specified activity (other than commercial fishing) within a specified geographical region if certain findings are made and either regulations are issued or, if the taking is limited to harassment, a notice of a proposed authorization is provided to the public for review.

An authorization for incidental takings shall be granted if NMFS finds that the taking will have a negligible impact on the species or stock(s), will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of the species or stock(s) for subsistence uses (where relevant), and if the permissible methods of taking and requirements pertaining to the mitigation, monitoring and reporting of such takings are set forth. NMFS has defined “negligible impact” in 50 CFR 216.103 as an impact resulting from the specified activity that cannot be reasonably expected to, and is not reasonably likely to, adversely affect the species or stock through effects on annual rates of recruitment or survival.

Except with respect to certain activities not pertinent here, the MMPA defines “harassment” as: any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which: (i) has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild (Level A harassment); or (ii) has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering (Level B harassment).

On January 19, 2021, we issued a final rule with regulations to govern the unintentional taking of marine mammals incidental to geophysical survey activities conducted by oil and gas industry operators, and those persons authorized to conduct activities on their behalf (collectively “industry operators”), in U.S. waters of the GOM over the course of 5 years (86 FR 5322, January 19, 2021). The rule was based on our

findings that the total taking from the specified activities over the 5-year period will have a negligible impact on the affected species or stock(s) of marine mammals and will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of those species or stocks for subsistence uses. The rule became effective on April 19, 2021.

Our regulations at 50 CFR 217.180 *et seq.* allow for the issuance of LOAs to industry operators for the incidental take of marine mammals during geophysical survey activities and prescribe the permissible methods of taking and other means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on marine mammal species or stocks and their habitat (often referred to as mitigation), as well as requirements pertaining to the monitoring and reporting of such taking. Under 50 CFR 217.186(e), issuance of an LOA shall be based on a determination that the level of taking will be consistent with the findings made for the total taking allowable under these regulations and a determination that the amount of take authorized under the LOA is of no more than small numbers.

NMFS issued an LOA to LLOG on January 20, 2022, for the take of marine mammals incidental to the following vertical seismic profile (VSP) survey types: Zero Offset, Offset, Walk Away, Salt Proximity and/or Check Shots after reaching total depth of any of the proposed wells operated by LLOG within the Keathley Canyon Area, effective March 1, 2022 through December 31, 2022. Please see the **Federal Register** notice of issuance (87 FR 3084, January 20, 2022) for additional detail regarding the LOA and the survey activity.

LLOG subsequently requested modification of the December 31, 2022, expiration date to December 31, 2023, due to survey delays and NMFS modified the LOA accordingly (87 FR 41670, July 13, 2022). More recently, LLOG informed NMFS that the survey would be further delayed, and requested a second modification to the expiration date of the LOA (from December 31, 2023, to December 31, 2026) to

accommodate the delays. There are no other changes to LLOG's planned activity. Since issuance of the LOA, no survey work has occurred.

### **Authorization**

NMFS has changed the expiration date of the LOA from December 31, 2023, to December 31, 2026. There are no other changes to the LOA as described in the January 20, 2022, **Federal Register** notice of issuance (87 FR 3084): the specified survey activity; estimated take by incidental harassment; and small numbers analysis and determination remain unchanged and are incorporated here by reference.

Dated: December 27, 2023.

**Kimberly Damon-Randall,**

*Director, Office of Protected Resources,*

*National Marine Fisheries Service.*

[FR Doc. 2024-00007 Filed: 1/4/2024 8:45 am; Publication Date: 1/5/2024]