



## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XD629]

#### **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; issuance of revised 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, notification is hereby given that NMFS has issued a revised Letter of Authorization (LOA) to WesternGeco, in place of TGS, for the take of marine mammals incidental to geophysical survey activity in the Gulf of Mexico.

**DATES:** The LOA is effective through September 28, 2024.

**ADDRESSES:** The LOA, original LOA request, request for transferal, and supporting documentation are available online at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/incidental-take-authorization-oil-and-gas-industry-geophysical-survey-activity-gulf-mexico>. In case of problems accessing these documents, please call the contact listed below (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**).

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Rachel Wachtendonk, 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 Gulf of Mexico (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.

### **Summary of Request**

On September 27, 2023, NMFS issued an LOA to TGS (88 FR 68106, October 3, 2023) to take marine mammals incidental to a three-dimensional (3D) ocean bottom node (OBN) survey in the Green Canyon, Ewing Bank, and Atwater Valley protraction areas, including approximately 380 lease blocks. Approximate water depths of the survey area range from 150 to 2,000 meters (m). See section F of the LOA application for a map of the area. Additional description of the planned survey, as well as analysis related to the issuance of that LOA, is available in TGS' LOA application and the aforementioned **Federal Register** notice of issuance.

On December 20, 2023, TGS requested the transfer of the LOA to its partner in the planned survey effort (WesternGeco). WesternGeco confirmed to NMFS that it similarly requested transfer of the LOA. With the transfer of the LOA, WesternGeco agrees to comply with the associated terms, conditions, stipulations, and restrictions of

the original LOA. No other changes were requested. The revised LOA remains effective through September 28, 2024.

The revised LOA sets forth only a change in the LOA holder's name. There are no other changes to the LOA as described in the October 3, 2023, **Federal Register** notice of issuance (88 FR 68106): the specified activity; estimated take by incidental harassment; and small numbers analysis and determination; and the period of effectiveness remain unchanged and are herein incorporated by reference.

### **Authorization**

NMFS is changing the name of the holder of the LOA from "TGS" to "WesternGeco"

Dated: January 24, 2024.

**Catherine Marzin,**

*Deputy Director, Office of Protected Resources,*

*National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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