



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XF554]

Marine Mammals; File No. 29313

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

ACTION: Notice; receipt of application.

SUMMARY: Notice is hereby given that Michelle Shero, Ph.D., Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 266 Woods Hole Road, Woods Hole, MA 02543, has applied in due form for a permit to conduct research on Weddell seals (*Leptonychotes weddellii*).

DATES: Written comments must be received on or before [*insert date 30 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER*].

ADDRESSES: The application and related documents are available for review by selecting “Records Open for Public Comment” from the “Features” box on the Applications and Permits for Protected Species home page, <https://apps.nmfs.noaa.gov>, and then selecting File No. 29313 from the list of available applications. These documents are also available upon written request via email to NMFS.Pr1Comments@noaa.gov.

Written comments on this application should be submitted via email to NMFS.Pr1Comments@noaa.gov. Please include File No. 29313 in the subject line of the email comment.

Those individuals requesting a public hearing should submit a written request via email to NMFS.Pr1Comments@noaa.gov. The request should set forth the specific reasons why a hearing on this application would be appropriate.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Sara Young or Shasta McClenahan, Ph.D., (301) 427-8401.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The subject permit is requested under the authority of the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*) and the regulations governing the taking and importing of marine mammals (50 CFR part 216).

The applicant requests a permit to take Weddell seals to assess the nature and underlying mechanisms that contribute to the significant heterogeneity observed in reproductive rates and animal fitness that exist within wild animal populations. To achieve project goals, a cohort of 20 female-pup pairs (10 high-quality, 10 low-quality) in Erebus Bay, Antarctica will undergo health assessments across the austral summer. Dive recorders will also be deployed during this time, and instruments will be recovered after the winter (gestational) foraging period. At each handling, female-pup pairs will be given a health exam, physiological samples collected, and instruments deployed to monitor dive behaviors. In addition, females will undergo a reproductive ultrasound examination during late lactation to track ovulation. Seals may be taken by capture and restraint for drug administration, biological sampling, blood sampling, instrumentation, marking, measuring, ultrasound, and weighing. Weddell seals may also be taken by harassment through counting surveys, collection of molt, scat, spew, urine, and unmanned aircraft systems for photogrammetry. Up to 15 unintentional mortalities of Weddell seals, including humane euthanasia if warranted, are also requested across the life of the permit. Samples collected during research would be imported back into the United States and may be exported to collaborators. Crabeater seals (*Lobodon carcinophagus*) may also be unintentionally harassed during research activities. The permit would be valid for 10 years from the date of issuance.

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*), an initial determination has been made that the activity proposed is categorically excluded from the requirement to prepare an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

Concurrent with the publication of this notice in the **Federal Register**, NMFS is forwarding copies of the application to the Marine Mammal Commission and its Committee of Scientific Advisors.

Dated: March 16, 2026.

Shannon Bettridge,

Chief, Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Conservation Division,

Office of Protected Resources,

National Marine Fisheries Service.

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