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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648-XG131]

Draft 2026 Marine Mammal Stock Assessment Reports

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

ACTION: Notice; request for comments and new information.

SUMMARY: NMFS reviewed the Alaska, Atlantic, and Pacific regional marine mammal stock assessment reports (SARs) in accordance with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). SARs for marine mammals in all three regions were revised to include new information. NMFS is soliciting public comments on the draft 2026 SARs. We will consider all comments that are received by the close of the comment period.

DATES: Comments must be received by [*insert date 90 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER*].

ADDRESSES: The 2026 draft SARs are available in electronic form via the Internet at *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/draft-marine-mammal-stock-assessment-reports*.

You may submit comments or new information, identified by NOAA-NMFS-2026-3499, via electronic submission through the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal:

Electronic Submission: Submit all electronic public comments via the Federal e-Rulemaking Portal. Go to *https://www.regulations.gov* and type NOAA-NMFS-2026-3499 in the Search box. Click on the "Comment" icon, complete the required fields, and enter or attach your comments.

Instructions: NMFS may not consider comments if they are sent by any other method, to any other address or individual, or received after the end of the comment

period. All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted for public viewing on *https://www.regulations.gov* without change. All personal identifying information (*e.g.*, name, address, *etc.*), confidential business information, or otherwise sensitive information submitted voluntarily by the sender will be publicly accessible. NMFS will accept anonymous comments (enter "N/A" in the required fields if you wish to remain anonymous).

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Zachary Schakner, Office of Science and Technology, (301) 427-8106, *Zachary.Schakner@noaa.gov*; Nancy Young, *Nancy.Young@noaa.gov*, regarding Alaska regional stock assessments; Jessica McCordic, *Jessica.McCordic@noaa.gov*, regarding Atlantic, Gulf of America, and Caribbean regional stock assessments; or Amanda Bradford, *Amanda.Bradford@noaa.gov*, regarding Pacific regional stock assessments.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Section 117 of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq*.) requires NMFS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to prepare stock assessments for each stock of marine mammals occurring in waters under the jurisdiction of the United States. These SARs must contain information regarding the distribution and abundance of the stock, population growth rates and trends, estimates of annual human-caused mortality and serious injury (M/SI) from all sources, descriptions of the commercial fisheries with which the stock interacts, and the status of the stock. Initial SARs were completed in 1995.

The MMPA requires NMFS and USFWS to review the SARs at least annually for strategic stocks and stocks for which significant new information is available and at least once every three years for non-strategic stocks. The term "strategic stock" means a

marine mammal stock: (A) for which the level of direct human-caused mortality exceeds the potential biological removal level (defined by the MMPA as the maximum number of animals, not including natural mortalities, that may be removed from a marine mammal stock while allowing that stock to reach or maintain its optimum sustainable population); (B) which, based on the best available scientific information, is declining and is likely to be listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) within the foreseeable future; or (C) which is listed as a threatened species or endangered species under the ESA or is designated as depleted under the MMPA. NMFS and USFWS are required to revise a SAR if the review indicates that the status of the stock has changed or can be more accurately determined.

NMFS reviewed the SARs of all strategic stocks and considered whether significant new information was available for all other stocks under NMFS ' jurisdiction. As a result of this review, NMFS revised or developed new reports for 42 stocks in the Alaska, Atlantic, and Pacific regions. The 2026 revisions to the SARs consist primarily of updated or revised human-caused M/SI estimates and updated abundance estimates.

In this notice, NMFS is requesting comment on a consolidated draft 2025 and 2026 SAR cycle package (hereinafter referred to as the 2026 draft SARs). A portion of these draft SARs (originally the 2025 SAR drafts) underwent review by one of three independent regional scientific review groups (SRGs), which are established under the MMPA to provide advice to NMFS and USFWS on a range of marine mammal science and management issues. For the remaining draft SARs, NMFS is conducting concurrent public comment and SRG review to increase efficiency and the timeliness of publishing final SARs. With this approach, NMFS is exploring potential ways to provide the SRGs more time and flexibility for their review and reduce the lag between the availability of new data to inform the SARs and the publication of that information in a final SAR. The draft SARs included in this pilot concurrent review process are delineated by region in

tables 1, 2, and 3 below with a + symbol. As a result of the time required for assessing new scientific information, revising, and peer-reviewing the SARs, the period covered by the 2026 draft SARs is generally 2019 through 2023 or 2024.

For 2026, NMFS is also introducing a new approach for development and publication of SARs to improve reproducibility, transparency, and efficiency of their production and offer increased accessibility through more modern formats (*e.g.*, HTML). This updated methodology was applied to the SARs for the Alaska harbor seals (12 Alaska stocks combined; table 1); Humpback whales (Gulf of Maine stock; table 2), Hawaiian monk seal (Hawaiian islands stock, table 3); false killer whales (3 Pacific Islands stocks combined, table 3); and spinner dolphins (6 Pacific Islands stocks combined, table 3).

In providing public comments on the draft 2026 SARs, please identify which draft revised SAR you are commenting on, make your comments as specific as possible, confine comments to issues pertinent to the draft revised SARs, and explain the reasons for any changes you recommend. Where possible, your comments should reference the specific section or paragraph of the SAR that you are addressing. NMFS will focus its responses on substantive comments that address the information, analyses, or conclusions in a specific draft revised SAR. Comments addressing broader policy issues, agency-wide guidance, or matters not specific to the information, analyses, or conclusions in a draft revised SAR may not be considered or addressed.

Alaska Reports

NMFS reviewed new information for 41 existing stocks (including all of the strategic stocks) under its jurisdiction in the Alaska Region for the 2026 SAR cycle and revised information for 16 stocks contained in 5 SARs: 2 strategic stocks and 14 non-strategic stocks. Information on the remaining Alaska region stocks can be found in the

final 2024 SARs (Young *et al.* 2026). A list of the new or revised SARs in 2026 for the Alaska region is presented in table 1.

Table 1 -- List of Marine Mammal Stocks in the Alaska Region Revised in 2026

Strategic Stocks	Non-Strategic Stocks
● North Pacific right whale, Eastern North Pacific ● Sperm whale, North Pacific	● Harbor seal, Aleutian Islands* ● Harbor seal, Pribilof Islands* ● Harbor seal, Bristol Bay* ● Harbor seal, North Kodiak* ● Harbor seal, South Kodiak* ● Harbor seal, Prince William Sound* ● Harbor seal, Cook Inlet/Shelikof Strait* ● Harbor seal, Glacier Bay/Icy Strait* ● Harbor seal, Lynn Canal/Stephens Passage* ● Harbor seal, Sitka/Chatham Strait* ● Harbor seal, Dixon/Cape Decision* ● Harbor seal, Clarence Strait* ● Beluga whale, Eastern Bering Sea* ● Killer whale, Eastern North Pacific Alaska Resident*

*Includes updated abundance estimates.

Atlantic Reports

NMFS reviewed new information for all existing stocks (including all of the strategic stocks) under its jurisdiction in the Atlantic Region for the 2026 SAR cycle and revised information for eight stocks: four strategic stocks and four non-strategic stocks (table 2). For three of the Gulf of America common bottlenose dolphin stocks, a stand-alone report was developed for the first time. These stocks were previously included within the larger combined report covering Northern Gulf of America Bay, Sound, and Estuary stocks. Information on the remaining Atlantic region stocks can be found in the final 2024 SARs (Hayes *et al.* 2025). The SARs for bottlenose dolphins along the Atlantic coast that were revised in 2026 were updated to reflect the latest accepted

taxonomy species name, Tamanend's bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops erebennus*, Costa *et al*. 2022). In finalizing the 2026 SARs, NMFS plans to make technical corrections to the remaining applicable bottlenose dolphin SARs in the Atlantic to align with the accepted taxonomy. Additional notable proposed revisions for the Atlantic SARs are provided below.

Western North Atlantic Tamanend's Bottlenose Dolphins

In the 2026 SARs, NMFS is proposing to combine the Western North Atlantic Northern Migratory Coastal and Southern Migratory Coastal stocks of Tamanend's bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops erebennus*) into a single stock: the Western North Atlantic Mid-Atlantic Coastal Stock. In addition, NMFS is proposing to combine the Northern North Carolina Estuarine System Stock and Southern North Carolina Estuarine System Stock of Tamanend's bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops erebennus*) into a single stock: the North Carolina Estuarine System Stock. In proposing these changes to stock structure, NMFS followed the process outlined in its Procedural Directive 02-204-03: Reviewing and Designating Stocks and Issuing Stock Assessment Reports under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (NMFS 2019). NMFS determined that these revisions will improve NMFS 'ability to manage these stocks given their common spatial and temporal distribution. Stock structure revisions are not final until they are formalized in a final SAR.

Table 2 -- List of marine mammal SARs in the Atlantic region revised in 2026

Strategic Stocks	**Non-Strategic Stocks**

● Gulf of America common bottlenose dolphin, Perdido Bay Stock*☐ ● Gulf of America common bottlenose dolphin, Mississippi Sound, Lake Borgne, Bay Boudreau Stock ● Tamanend's Bottlenose Dolphin, Mid-Atlantic Coastal (MAC) Stock +■ ● Tamanend's Bottlenose Dolphin, North Carolina Estuarine System Stock+■	● Gulf of America common bottlenose dolphin, Mobile Bay, Bonsecour Bay Stock*☐ ● Gulf of America common bottlenose dolphin, Mississippi River Delta Stock*☐ ● Gulf of America common bottlenose dolphin, Northern Coastal Stock ● Humpback Whale, Gulf of Maine Stock* +

* Includes updated abundance estimates.

☐ Represents a new stand-alone report. Previously only included within the Northern Gulf of America Bay, Sound, and Estuary Stocks combined report.

+Has not undergone SRG review and is included in the pilot concurrent review process.

■Denotes a proposed new stock.

Pacific Reports

NMFS reviewed all 85 stocks (including all of the strategic stocks) under its jurisdiction in the Pacific region (waters along the U.S. West Coast, within waters surrounding the main and Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, and within waters surrounding U.S. territories in the Western Pacific) for the 2026 SAR cycle and revised information for 18 stocks contained in 5 SARs: 7 strategic stocks and 11 non-strategic stocks. Information on the remaining Pacific region stocks can be found in the final 2024 SARs (Carretta *et al*. 2025). A list of revised SARs in 2026 for the Pacific region is presented in table 3. For efficiency, the two United States West Coast stocks of humpback whales (the Mainland Mexico-California-Oregon-Washington and Central America/Southern Mexico-California-Oregon-Washington stocks) have been combined into a single SAR.

Table 3 -- List of Marine Mammal SARs in the Pacific Region Revised in 2026

Strategic Stocks	Non-Strategic Stocks

● Monk seal, Hawai'i ● Killer whale, Eastern North Pacific Southern Resident* ● False killer whale, Hawai'i Pelagic* ● False killer whale, Main Hawaiian Islands Insular* ● Humpback Whale, Mainland Mexico - California-Oregon-Washington*+ ● Humpback Whale, Central America / Southern Mexico - California-Oregon-Washington *+ ● Gray Whale, Western North Pacific +	● Harbor Seal, Washington Northern Inland Waters* ● Harbor Seal, Southern Puget Sound* ● Harbor Seal, Hood Canal* ● False killer whale, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands ● Spinner Dolphin, Hawai'i Island* ● Spinner Dolphin, O'ahu / Maui Nui* ● Spinner Dolphin, Kaua'i and Ni'ihau ● Spinner Dolphin, Kuaihelani / Hōlanikū ● Spinner Dolphin, Manawai ● Spinner Dolphin, Hawai'i Pelagic ● Gray Whale, Eastern North Pacific

*Includes updated abundance estimates.
+Has not undergone SRG review and is included in the pilot concurrent review process.

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