“take” means to harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or to attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill marine mammals.

Authorization may be granted for periods up to 5 years if NMFS finds, after notification and opportunity for public comment, that the taking will have a negligible impact on the species or stock(s) of marine mammals and will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of the species or stock(s) for subsistence uses (where relevant). In addition, NMFS must prescribe regulations that include permissible methods of taking and other means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on the species and its habitat and on the availability of the species for subsistence uses, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance. The regulations must include requirements for monitoring and reporting of such taking.

Regulations governing the taking of northern elephant seals (Mirounga angustirostris), Pacific harbor seals (Phoca vitulina richardsi), and California sea lions (Zalophus californianus), by harassment, incidental to missile launch operations at SNI, were issued on June 2, 2009, and remain in effect until June 2, 2014 (74 FR 26580, June 3, 2009). For detailed information on this action, please refer to that document. The regulations include mitigation, monitoring, and reporting requirements for the incidental take of marine mammals during missile launches at SNI.

Summary of Request

On September 24, 2013, NMFS received a request for an LOA renewal pursuant to the aforementioned regulations that would authorize take of pinnipeds, by harassment, incidental to missile launch operations from SNI. The request covers the remaining 6 months of the Navy’s current regulations.

Summary of Activity Conducted During 2012–2013

As described in the Navy’s annual monitoring report, the missile launch operations conducted by the Navy during this time period were within the scope and amounts authorized by the 2012–2013 LOA, and the levels of take remain within the scope and amounts contemplated by the final rule and detailed in the 2012–2013 LOA. A total of eight launches took place using two missile types on seven different days.

Planned Activities and Estimated Take for 2013–2014

During 2013–2014, the Navy expects to conduct the same type and amount of launches identified in the 2012–2013 LOA. Therefore, NMFS is authorizing the same amount of take authorized in 2012.

2012–2013 Monitoring

The Navy conducted the monitoring required by the 2012–2013 LOA and described in the Monitoring Plan, which included acoustic monitoring of missile launches and visual monitoring of pinnipeds. The Navy submitted their 2012–2013 Monitoring Report, which is posted on NMFS’ Web site (http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental.html), within the required timeframe. In summary, visual monitoring shows that pinnipeds startled and moved in response to launch sounds and most individuals returned to normal behavior within 5 minutes.

Authorization

The Navy complied with the requirements of the 2012–2013 LOA and NMFS has determined that there was no evidence of pinniped injuries or mortalities related to vehicle launches from SNI. The Navy’s activities fell within the scope of the activities analyzed in the 2009 rule, and the observed take did not exceed that authorized in the 2012–2013 LOA. NMFS has determined that this action continues to have a negligible impact on the affected species or stocks of marine mammals on SNI. Accordingly, NMFS has issued an LOA to the Navy authorizing the take of marine mammals, by harassment, incidental to missile launch activities from SNI. The provision requiring that the activities not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of the affected species or stock for subsistence uses does not apply for this action.

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