

Florida portion conveys some type of adaptive potential to the species rangewide, we do not currently have evidence of this. In particular, it is unclear if this subpopulation is uniquely adapted genetically to tolerate colder conditions. The projected PVA runs indicate the subpopulation is generally stable (Carlson *et al.* 2019). Pessimistic PVA scenarios resulted in decreased abundance for this portion of the population, but not extinction (Carlson *et al.* 2019). Although this portion has some extinction risk, its low abundance and limited connectivity suggest it is not significant to the viability of the species overall.

In summary, we find that there is no portion of the dwarf seahorse's range that is both significant to the species as a whole and endangered or threatened. After considering all the portions we believe that some portions (east coast of Florida and northwest Florida) carry an elevated risk of extinction relative to the status of the species range-wide; however, these portions are not biologically significant to the species. In contrast, the south and southwest Florida subpopulation appears to be biologically important to the continued viability of the overall species in terms of abundance, connectivity, and productivity, but this subpopulation is robust and not at risk of extinction now or in the foreseeable future. Thus, we find no reason to list this species, based on an analysis within a significant portion of its range.

#### Final Listing Determination

Section 4(b)(1) of the ESA requires that NMFS make listing determinations based solely on the best scientific and commercial data available after conducting a review of the status of the species and taking into account those efforts, if any, being made by any state or foreign nation, or political subdivisions thereof, to protect and conserve the species. We have independently reviewed the best available scientific and commercial information, including the petitions, public comments submitted on the 90-day finding (77 FR 26478; May 4, 2012), the Status Review Report (NMFS 2020), and other published and unpublished information. We considered each of the statutory factors to determine whether each contributed significantly to the extinction risk of the species. As previously explained, we could not identify a significant portion of the species' range that is threatened or endangered. Therefore, our determination is based on a synthesis and integration of the foregoing information, factors and considerations,

and their effects on the status of the species throughout its entire range.

We conclude that the dwarf seahorse is not presently in danger of extinction, nor is it likely to become so in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Therefore, the dwarf seahorse does not meet the definition of a threatened species or an endangered species and does not warrant listing as threatened or endangered at this time.

#### References

A complete list of the references used in this proposed rule is available upon request (see **ADDRESSES**).

#### Peer Review

In December 2004, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review establishing minimum peer review standards, a transparent process for public disclosure of peer review planning, and opportunities for public participation. The OMB Bulletin, implemented under the Information Quality Act (Pub. L. 106–554) is intended to enhance the quality and credibility of the Federal government's scientific information, and applies to influential or highly influential scientific information disseminated on or after June 16, 2005. To satisfy our requirements under the OMB Bulletin, we obtained independent peer review of the Status Review Report. Three independent specialists were selected from the academic and scientific community for this review. All peer reviewer comments were addressed prior to dissemination of the final Status Review Report and publication of this proposed rule. Both the Status Review Report and the Peer Review Report can be found here: [https://www.cio.noaa.gov/services\\_programs/prplans/ID411.html](https://www.cio.noaa.gov/services_programs/prplans/ID411.html).

#### Authority

The authority for this action is the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*)

Dated: July 22, 2020.

**Samuel D. Rauch, III,**

*Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs, National Marine Fisheries Service.*

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#### DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

[RTID 0648–XA248]

#### Takes of Marine Mammals Incidental to Specified Activities; Taking Marine Mammals Incidental to a Marine Geophysical Survey in the Aleutian Islands

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

**ACTION:** Notice; proposed incidental harassment authorization; request for comments on proposed authorization and possible renewal.

**SUMMARY:** NMFS has received a request from the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory of Columbia University (L-DEO) for authorization to take marine mammals incidental to a marine geophysical survey in the Aleutian Islands. Pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), NMFS is requesting comments on its proposal to issue an incidental harassment authorization (IHA) to incidentally take marine mammals during the specified activities. NMFS is also requesting comments on a possible one-time, one-year renewal that could be issued under certain circumstances and if all requirements are met, as described in *Request for Public Comments* at the end of this notice. NMFS will consider public comments prior to making any final decision on the issuance of the requested MMPA authorizations and agency responses will be summarized in the final notice of our decision.

**DATES:** Comments and information must be received no later than August 27, 2020.

**ADDRESSES:** Comments should be addressed to Jolie Harrison, Chief, Permits and Conservation Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service. Physical comments should be sent to 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910 and electronic comments should be sent to *ITPLaws@noaa.gov*.

**Instructions:** NMFS is not responsible for comments sent by any other method, to any other address or individual, or received after the end of the comment period. Comments received electronically, including all attachments, must not exceed a 25-megabyte file size. All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted online at [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/)

*incidental-take-authorizations-under-marine-mammal-protection-act* without change. All personal identifying information (e.g., name, address) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Ben Laws, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, (301) 427–8401. Electronic copies of the application and supporting documents, as well as a list of the references cited in this document, may be obtained online at: [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/incidental-take-authorizations-under-marine-mammal-protection-act](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/incidental-take-authorizations-under-marine-mammal-protection-act). In case of problems accessing these documents, please call the contact listed above.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

##### Background

The MMPA prohibits the “take” of marine mammals, with certain exceptions. Sections 101(a)(5)(A) and (D) of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*) direct the Secretary of Commerce (as delegated to NMFS) 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 incidental take authorization may be provided to the public for review.

Authorization for incidental takings shall be granted if NMFS finds that the taking will have a negligible impact on the species or stock(s) and will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of the species or stock(s) for taking for subsistence uses (where relevant). Further, NMFS must prescribe the permissible methods of taking and other “means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact” on the affected species or stocks and their habitat, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance, and on the availability of the species or stocks for taking for certain subsistence uses (referred to in shorthand as “mitigation”); and requirements pertaining to the mitigation, monitoring and reporting of the takings are set forth. The definitions of all applicable MMPA statutory terms cited above are included in the relevant sections below.

##### National Environmental Policy Act

To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969

(NEPA; 42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*) and NOAA Administrative Order (NAO) 216–6A, NMFS must review our proposed action (*i.e.*, the issuance of an incidental harassment authorization) with respect to potential impacts on the human environment.

Accordingly, NMFS plans to adopt the National Science Foundation’s (NSF) Environmental Assessment (EA), as we have preliminarily determined that it includes adequate information analyzing the effects on the human environment of issuing the IHA. NSF’s EA is available at [www.nsf.gov/geo/oce/envcomp/](http://www.nsf.gov/geo/oce/envcomp/).

We will review all comments submitted in response to this notice prior to concluding our NEPA process or making a final decision on the IHA request.

##### Summary of Request

On March 27, 2020, NMFS received a request from L-DEO for an IHA to take marine mammals incidental to a marine geophysical survey along and across the Aleutian Andeanof Arc in Alaska. L-DEO submitted a revised version of the application, which was deemed adequate and complete, on June 25, 2020. L-DEO’s request is for take of 23 species of marine mammals by Level B harassment. In addition, NMFS proposes to authorize take by Level A harassment for seven of these species.

##### Description of Proposed Activity

###### Overview

Researchers from L-DEO and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), with funding from NSF, propose to conduct a high-energy seismic survey from the Research Vessel (R/V) *Marcus G. Langseth* (Langseth) along and across the Aleutian Andeanof Arc in Alaska during September–October 2020. The proposed two-dimensional (2-D) seismic survey would occur within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the United States. The survey would use a 36-airgun towed array with a total discharge volume of ~6,600 cubic inches (in<sup>3</sup>) as an acoustic source, acquiring return signals using both a towed streamer as well as ocean bottom seismometers (OBSS).

The proposed study would use 2-D seismic surveying to seismically image the structure of the crust along and across the Andeanof segment of the Aleutian Arc, an intact arc segment with a simple and well known history. Existing geochemical analyses of igneous rocks from this segment suggest an along-segment trend in crustal-scale fractionation processes. Seismic velocity provides strong constraints on bulk

composition, and so seismic images will reveal the constructional architecture, vertical fractionation patterns, and along-arc trends in both of those things. Together with existing observations from surface rocks (e.g., bulk composition, volatile content) and forcing parameters (e.g., slab geometry, sediment input, deformation-inferred stress regime), hypotheses related to controls on oceanic-arc crustal construction and fractionation can be tested and refined.

###### Dates and Duration

The proposed survey is expected to last for approximately 48 days, including approximately 16 days of seismic operations, 19 days of equipment deployment/retrieval, and 8 days of transits, and 5 contingency days (accounting for potential delays due to, e.g., weather). R/V *Langseth* would likely leave out of and return to port in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, during September–October 2020.

###### Specific Geographic Region

The proposed survey would occur within the area of approximately 49–53.5° N and approximately 172.5–179° W. Representative survey tracklines are shown in Figure 1 in L-DEO’s application. Tracklines in the vicinity of specific Steller sea lion haul-outs and rookeries have subsequently been modified in order to ensure that the area assumed to be ensonified above the Level B harassment threshold (see “Estimated Take”) does not extend beyond a 3,000 foot (0.9 km) buffer around those areas. Some deviation in actual track lines, including the order of survey operations, could be necessary for reasons such as science drivers, poor data quality, inclement weather, or mechanical issues with the research vessel and/or equipment. The survey is proposed to occur within the EEZ of the United States, including Alaskan state waters, ranging in depth from 35–7,100 meters (m). Approximately 3,224 km of transect lines would be surveyed. Most of the survey (73 percent) would occur in deep water (>1,000 m), 26 percent would occur in intermediate water (100–1,000 m deep), and approximately 1 percent would take place in shallow water <100 m deep.

###### Detailed Description of Specific Activity

The procedures to be used for the proposed surveys would be similar to those used during previous seismic surveys by L-DEO and would use conventional seismic methodology. The surveys would involve one source vessel, R/V *Langseth*, which is owned by NSF and operated on its behalf by L-

DEO. R/V *Langseth* would deploy an array of 36 airguns as an energy source with a total volume of 6,600 in<sup>3</sup>. The array consists of 36 elements, including 20 Bolt 1500LL airguns with volumes of 180 to 360 in<sup>3</sup> and 16 Bolt 1900LLX airguns with volumes of 40 to 120 in<sup>3</sup>. The airgun array configuration is illustrated in Figure 2–11 of NSF and USGS's Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS; NSF-USGS, 2011). (The PEIS is available online at: [www.nsf.gov/geo/oce/envcomp/usgs-nf-marine-seismic-research/nsf-usgs-final-eis-oeis-with-appendices.pdf](http://www.nsf.gov/geo/oce/envcomp/usgs-nf-marine-seismic-research/nsf-usgs-final-eis-oeis-with-appendices.pdf)). The vessel speed during seismic operations would be approximately 4.5 knots (~8.3 km/hour) during the survey and the airgun array would be towed at a depth of 9 m. The receiving system would consist of OBSs and a towed hydrophone streamer with a nominal length of 8 km. As the airguns are towed along the survey lines, the hydrophone streamer would transfer the data to the on-board processing system, and the OBSs would receive and store the returning acoustic signals internally for later analysis.

The study consists of one east-west strike-line transect (~540 km), two north-south dip-line transects (~420 km and ~285 km), connecting multi-channel seismic (MCS) transects (~480 km), and an MCS survey of the Amlia Fracture Zone (~285 km). The representative tracklines shown in Figure 1 of L-DEO's application have a total length of 2,010 km. The strike- and dip-line transects would first be acquired using OBSs, which would be deployed along one line at a time, the line would be surveyed, and the OBSs would then be recovered, before moving onto the next line. After all refraction data is acquired, the strike and dip lines would be acquired a second time using MCS. The MCS transect lines and Amlia Fracture Zone transect lines would be acquired only once using MCS. Thus, the line km to be acquired during the entire survey is expected to be approximately 3,255 km. There could be additional seismic operations associated with turns, airgun testing, and repeat coverage of any areas where initial data quality is sub-standard, and 25 percent has been added to the assumed survey line-kms to account for this potential.

For the majority of the survey (90 percent), R/V *Langseth* would tow the full array, consisting of four strings with 36 airguns (plus 4 spares) with a total discharge volume of 6,600 in<sup>3</sup>. In certain

locations (see Figure 1 of L-DEO's application) closest to islands, only half the array (18 airguns) would be operated, with a total volume of approximately 3,300 in<sup>3</sup>. The airguns would fire at a shot interval of 22 s during MCS shooting with the hydrophone streamer and at a 120-s interval during refraction surveying to OBSs.

The seismometers would consist of short-period multi-component OBSs from Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO). Fifty OBSs would be deployed and subsequently retrieved by R/V *Langseth* prior to MCS surveying. When an OBS is ready to be retrieved, an acoustic release transponder (pinger) interrogates the instrument at a frequency of 12 kHz; a response is received at the same frequency. The burn-wire release assembly is then activated, and the instrument is released from its 36-kg iron grate anchor to float to the surface. Take of marine mammals is not expected to occur incidental to L-DEO's use of OBSs.

In addition to the operations of the airgun array, a multibeam echosounder (MBES), a sub-bottom profiler (SBP), and an Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP) would be operated from R/V *Langseth* continuously during the seismic surveys, but not during transit to and from the survey area. Take of marine mammals is not expected to occur incidental to use of the MBES, SBP, or ADCP because they will be operated only during seismic acquisition, and it is assumed that, during simultaneous operations of the airgun array and the other sources, any marine mammals close enough to be affected by the MBES, SBP, and ADCP would already be affected by the airguns. However, whether or not the airguns are operating simultaneously with the other sources, given their characteristics (e.g., narrow downward-directed beam), marine mammals would experience no more than one or two brief ping exposures, if any exposure were to occur. Proposed mitigation, monitoring, and reporting measures are described in detail later in this document (please see *Proposed Mitigation and Proposed Monitoring and Reporting*).

#### Description of Marine Mammals in the Area of Specified Activities

Sections 3 and 4 of the application summarize available information

regarding status and trends, distribution and habitat preferences, and behavior and life history, of the potentially affected species. Additional information regarding population trends and threats may be found in NMFS's Stock Assessment Reports (SARs; [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-stock-assessments](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-stock-assessments)) and more general information about these species (e.g., physical and behavioral descriptions) may be found on NMFS's website ([www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species)).

Table 1 lists all species with expected potential for occurrence in the survey area and summarizes information related to the population or stock, including regulatory status under the MMPA and ESA and potential biological removal (PBR), where known. For taxonomy, we follow Committee on Taxonomy (2019). PBR is 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 (as described in NMFS's SARs). While no mortality is anticipated or authorized here, PBR and annual serious injury and mortality from anthropogenic sources are included here as gross indicators of the status of the species and other threats.

Marine mammal abundance estimates presented in this document represent the total number of individuals that make up a given stock or the total number estimated within a particular study or survey area. NMFS's stock abundance estimates for most species represent the total estimate of individuals within the geographic area, if known, that comprises that stock. For some species, this geographic area may extend beyond U.S. waters. All managed stocks in this region are assessed in NMFS's U.S. Pacific and Alaska SARs (Caretta et al., 2019; Muto et al., 2019). All MMPA stock information presented in Table 1 is the most recent available at the time of publication and is available in the 2018 SARs (Caretta et al., 2019; Muto et al., 2019) and draft 2019 SARs (available online at: [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/draft-marine-mammal-stock-assessment-reports](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/draft-marine-mammal-stock-assessment-reports)).

TABLE 1—MARINE MAMMALS THAT COULD OCCUR IN THE SURVEY AREA

Common name	Scientific name	Stock	ESA/ MMPA status; strategic (Y/N) <sup>1</sup>	Stock abundance (CV, N <sub>min</sub> , most recent abundance survey) <sup>2</sup>	PBR	Annual M/SI <sup>3</sup>
<b>Order Cetartiodactyla—Cetacea—Superfamily Mysticeti (baleen whales)</b>						
Family Balaenidae: North Pacific right whale .....	<i>Eubalaena japonica</i> .....	Eastern North Pacific (ENP) ..	E/D; Y	31 (0.226; 26; 2015) .....	0.05	0
Family Eschrichtiidae: Gray whale .....	<i>Eschrichtius robustus</i> .....	ENP .....	-; N	26,960 (0.05; 25,849; 2016) ..	801	139
Family Balaenopteridae (rorquals): Humpback whale .....	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i> <i>kuzira.</i>	Central North Pacific (CNP)*	E/D; Y	10,103 (0.3; 7,891; 2006) .....	83	25
Minke whale .....	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i> <i>scammoni.</i>	Western North Pacific* .....	E/D; Y	1,107 (0.3; 865; 2006) .....	3	2.6
Sei whale .....	<i>B. borealis borealis</i>	ENP .....	-; N	Unknown .....	n/a	0
Fin whale .....	<i>B. physalus physalus</i>	Northeast Pacific* .....	E/D; Y	519 (0.4; 374; 2014) .....	0.75	0.4
Blue whale .....	<i>B. musculus musculus</i> .....	ENP .....	E/D; Y	1,496 (0.44; 1,050; 2014) .....	12 <sup>4</sup> 1.2	≥19.4
<b>Superfamily Odontoceti (toothed whales, dolphins, and porpoises)</b>						
Family Physeteridae: Sperm whale .....	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i> .....	North Pacific* .....	E/D; Y	Unknown .....	n/a	4.7
Family Ziphiidae (beaked whales): Cuvier's beaked whale ...	<i>Ziphius cavirostris</i> .....	Alaska .....	-; N	Unknown .....	n/a	0
Baird's beaked whale ....	<i>Berardius bairdii</i> .....	Alaska .....	-; N	Unknown .....	n/a	0
Stejneger's beaked whale.	<i>Mesoplodon stejnegeri</i> .....	Alaska .....	-; N	Unknown .....	n/a	0
Family Delphinidae: Pacific white-sided dol- phin.	<i>Lagenorhynchus obliquidens</i>	North Pacific <sup>5</sup> .....	-; N	26,880 (n/a; 26,880; 1990) ....	n/a	0
Northern right whale dol- phin.	<i>Lissodelphis borealis</i> .....	CA/OR/WA* .....	-; N	26,556 (0.44; 18,608; 2014) ..	179	3.8
Risso's dolphin .....	<i>Grampus griseus</i> .....	CA/OR/WA* .....	-; N	6,336 (0.32; 4,817; 2014) .....	46	≥3.7
Killer whale .....	<i>Orcinus orca</i> <sup>4</sup> .....	ENP Offshore .....	-; N	300 (0.1; 276; 2012) .....	2.8	0
		ENP Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, and Bering Sea Transient.	-; N	587 (n/a; 2012) .....	5.9	1
		ENP Alaska Resident .....	-; N	2,347 (n/a; 2012) .....	24	1
Family Phocoenidae (por- poises): Harbor porpoise .....	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i> <i>vomerina.</i>	Bering Sea <sup>5</sup> .....	-; Y	48,215 (0.22; 40,150; 1999) ..	n/a	0.2
Dall's porpoise .....	<i>Phocoenoides dalli dalli</i> .....	Alaska <sup>5</sup> .....	-; N	83,400 (0.097; n/a; 1991) .....	n/a	38
<b>Order Carnivora—Superfamily Pinnipedia</b>						
Family Otariidae (eared seals and sea lions): Northern fur seal .....	<i>Callorhinus ursinus</i> .....	Pribilof Islands/Eastern Pa- cific.	D; Y	620,660 (0.2; 525,333; 2016)	11,295	399
Steller sea lion .....	<i>Eumetopias jubatus jubatus</i> ..	Western U.S. .....	E/D; Y	53,624 (n/a; 2018) .....	322	247
Family Phocidae (earless seals): Harbor seal .....	<i>Phoca vitulina richardii</i> .....	Aleutian Islands .....	-; N	5,588 (n/a; 5,366; 2018) .....	97	90
Spotted seal .....	<i>P. largha</i> .....	Alaska* .....	-; N	461,625 (n/a; 423,237; 2013)	12,697	329
Ribbon seal .....	<i>Histrionophoca fasciata</i> .....	Alaska* .....	-; N	184,697 (n/a; 163,086; 2013)	9,785	3.9
Northern elephant seal ...	<i>Mirounga angustirostris</i> .....	California Breeding .....	-; N	179,000 (n/a; 81,368; 2010) ..	4,882	8.8

<sup>1</sup> Stocks marked with an asterisk are addressed in further detail in text below.<sup>2</sup> Endangered Species Act (ESA) status: Endangered (E), Threatened (T)/MMPA status: Depleted (D). A dash (-) indicates that the species is not listed under the ESA or designated as depleted under the MMPA. Under the MMPA, a strategic stock is one for which the level of direct human-caused mortality exceeds PBR or which is determined to be declining and likely to be listed under the ESA within the foreseeable future. Any species or stock listed under the ESA is automatically designated under the MMPA as depleted and as a strategic stock.<sup>3</sup> NMFS marine mammal stock assessment reports at: [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-stock-assessments](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-stock-assessments). CV is coefficient of variation; N<sub>min</sub> is the minimum estimate of stock abundance. In some cases, CV is not applicable. For most stocks of killer whales, the abundance values represent direct counts of individually identifiable animals; therefore there is only a single abundance estimate with no associated CV. For certain stocks of pinnipeds, abundance estimates are based upon observations of animals (often pups) ashore multiplied by some correction factor derived from knowledge of the species' (or similar species') life history to arrive at a best abundance estimate; therefore, there is no associated CV. In these cases, the minimum abundance may represent actual counts of all animals ashore.<sup>4</sup> These values, found in NMFS's SARs, represent annual levels of human-caused mortality plus serious injury from all sources combined (e.g., commercial fisheries, subsistence hunting, ship strike). Annual M/SI often cannot be determined precisely and is in some cases presented as a minimum value. All M/SI values are as presented in the draft 2019 SARs.<sup>5</sup> Transient and resident killer whales are considered unnamed subspecies (Committee on Taxonomy, 2019).<sup>6</sup> Abundance estimates for these stocks are not considered current. PBR is therefore considered undetermined for these stocks, as there is no current minimum abundance estimate for use in calculation. We nevertheless present the most recent abundance estimates, as these represent the best available information for use in this document.<sup>7</sup> This stock is known to spend a portion of time outside the U.S. EEZ. Therefore, the PBR presented here is the allocation for U.S. waters only and is a portion of the total. The total PBR for blue whales is 2.1 (7/12 allocation for U.S. waters). Annual M/SI presented for these species is for U.S. waters only.

Prior to 2016, humpback whales were listed under the ESA as an endangered species worldwide. Following a 2015 global status review (Bettridge *et al.*, 2015), NMFS established 14 distinct population segments (DPS) with different listing statuses (81 FR 62259; September 8, 2016) pursuant to the ESA. The DPSs that occur in U.S. waters do not necessarily equate to the existing stocks designated under the MMPA and shown in Table 1.

Within Alaska waters, four current humpback whale DPSs may occur: The Western North Pacific (WNP) DPS (endangered), Hawaii DPS (not listed), Mexico DPS (threatened), and Central America DPS (endangered). Two humpback whale stocks designated under the MMPA may occur within Alaskan waters: The Western North Pacific Stock and the Central North Pacific Stock. Both these stocks are designated as depleted under the MMPA. According to Wade (2017), in the Aleutian Islands and Bering, Chukchi, and Beaufort Seas, encountered whales are most likely to be from the Hawaii DPS (86.8 percent), but could be from the Mexico DPS (11 percent) or WNP DPS (2.1 percent). Note that these probabilities reflect the upper limit of the 95 percent confidence interval of the probability of occurrence; therefore, numbers may not sum to 100 percent for a given area.

Although no comprehensive abundance estimate is available for the Alaska stock of minke whales, recent surveys provide estimates for portions of the stock's range. A 2010 survey conducted on the eastern Bering Sea shelf produced a provisional abundance estimate of 2,020 (CV = 0.73) whales (Friday *et al.*, 2013). This estimate is considered provisional because it has not been corrected for animals missed on the trackline, animals submerged when the ship passed, or responsive movement. Additionally, line-transect surveys were conducted in shelf and nearshore waters (within 30–45 nautical miles of land) in 2001–2003 between the Kenai Peninsula (150° W) and Amchitka Pass (178° W). Minke whale abundance was estimated to be 1,233 (CV = 0.34) for this area (also not been corrected for animals missed on the trackline) (Zerbini *et al.*, 2006). The majority of the sightings were in the Aleutian Islands, rather than in the Gulf of Alaska, and in water shallower than 200 m. These estimates cannot be used as an estimate of the entire Alaska stock of minke whales because only a portion of the stock's range was surveyed. Similarly, although a comprehensive abundance estimate is not available for the northeast Pacific stock of fin whales,

provisional estimates representing portions of the range are available. The same 2010 survey of the eastern Bering sea shelf provided an estimate of 1,061 (CV = 0.38) fin whales (Friday *et al.*, 2013). The estimate is not corrected for missed animals, but is expected to be robust as previous studies have shown that only small correction factors are needed for fin whales (Barlow, 1995). Zerbini *et al.* (2006) produced an estimate of 1,652 (95% CI: 1,142–2,389) fin whales for the area described above.

Current and historical estimates of the abundance of sperm whales in the North Pacific are considered unreliable, and caution should be exercised in interpreting published estimates (Muto *et al.*, 2017). However, Kato and Miyashita (1998) produced an abundance estimate of 102,112 (CV = 0.155) sperm whales in the western North Pacific (believed to be positively biased). The number of sperm whales occurring within Alaska waters is unknown.

Northern right whale dolphins and Risso's dolphins do not typically occur in waters surrounding the Aleutian Islands, though there have been rare sightings and acoustic detections in the region. NMFS considers these species extralimital to the survey area. However, L-DEO has requested the authorization of incidental take for these species, and we are acting on that request.

Ribbon seals and spotted seals are considered rare in the survey area. From late March to early May, ribbon seals inhabit the Bering Sea ice front. They are most abundant in the northern part of the ice front in the central and western parts of the Bering Sea. As the ice recedes in May to mid-July, the seals move farther north in the Bering Sea, where they haul out on the receding ice edge and remnant ice. As the ice melts, seals become more concentrated, with at least part of the Bering Sea population moving to the Bering Strait and the southern part of the Chukchi Sea. The distribution of spotted seals is seasonally related to specific life-history events that can be broadly divided into two periods: Late-fall through spring, when whelping, nursing, breeding, and molting occur in association with the presence of sea ice on which the seals haul out, and summer through fall when seasonal sea ice has melted and most spotted seals use land for hauling out. Satellite-tagging studies showed that seals tagged in the northeastern Chukchi Sea moved south in October and passed through the Bering Strait in November. Seals overwintered in the Bering Sea along the ice edge and made east-west movements along the edge. In summer and fall, spotted seals use coastal haul-

out sites regularly and may be found as far north as 69–72° N in the Chukchi and Beaufort seas. To the south, along the west coast of Alaska, spotted seals are known to occur around the Pribilof Islands, Bristol Bay, and the eastern Aleutian Islands. Although we do not expect these species of seals to be encountered, L-DEO has requested has requested the authorization of incidental take for these species, and we are acting on that request.

In addition, the northern (or eastern) sea otter (*Enhydra lutris kenyoni*) may be found in coastal waters of the survey area. However, sea otters are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and are not considered further in this document.

#### *Biologically Important Areas (BIA)*

Several biologically important areas for marine mammals are recognized in the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Gulf of Alaska. Critical habitat is designated for the Steller sea lion (58 FR 45269; August 27, 1993). Critical habitat is defined by section 3 of the ESA as (1) the specific areas within the geographical area occupied by the species, at the time it is listed, on which are found those physical or biological features (a) essential to the conservation of the species and (b) which may require special management considerations or protection; and (2) specific areas outside the geographical area occupied by the species at the time it is listed, upon a determination by the Secretary that such areas are essential for the conservation of the species.

Designated Steller sea lion critical habitat includes terrestrial, aquatic, and air zones that extend 3,000 ft (0.9 km) landward, seaward, and above each major rookery and major haulout in Alaska. For the Western DPS, the aquatic zone extends further, out 20 nmi (37 km) seaward of major rookeries and haulouts west of 144° W. In addition to major rookeries and haulouts, critical habitat foraging areas have been designated in Seguam Pass, Bogoslof area, and Shelikof Strait. Of the foraging areas, only Seguam Pass overlaps the proposed survey area. The Bogoslof foraging area is located to the east of the survey area, and Shelikof Strait is in the western Gulf of Alaska (GOA). In addition, “no approach” buffer areas around rookery sites of the Western DPS of Steller sea lions are identified. “No approach” zones are restricted areas wherein no vessel may approach within 3 nmi (5.6 km) of listed rookeries; some of these are adjacent to the survey area. In the Aleutian Islands, critical habitat includes 66 sites (26 rookeries and 40 haulout sites) and foraging areas in

Seguam Pass (within the proposed survey area) and the Bogoslof area (east of the survey area). Please see Figure 1 of L-DEO's application for additional detail.

Critical habitat has also been designated for the North Pacific right whale (73 FR 19000; April 8, 2008). The designation includes areas in the Bering Sea and GOA. However, the closest critical habitat unit, in the Bering Sea, is more than 400 km away from the proposed survey area. There is no critical habitat designated for any other species within the region. In addition, a feeding BIA for right whales is recognized to the south of Kodiak Island, and the Bering Sea critical habitat unit is also recognized as a BIA.

For fin whales, a BIA for feeding is recognized in Shelikof Strait, between Kodiak Island and the Alaska Peninsula, and extending west to the Semidi Islands. For gray whales, a feeding BIA is recognized to the south of Kodiak Island, and a migratory BIA is recognized as extending along the continental shelf throughout the GOA, through Unimak Pass in the eastern Aleutian Islands, and along the Bering Sea continental shelf. For humpback whales, feeding BIAs are recognized around the Shumagin Islands and around Kodiak Island. These areas are sufficiently distant from the proposed survey area that no effects to important behaviors occurring in the BIAs should be expected. Moreover, the timeframe of the planned survey does not overlap with expected highest abundance of whales on the feeding BIAs or with gray whale migratory periods.

A separate feeding BIA is recognized in the Bering Sea for fin whales. Because the distribution of presumed feeding fin whales in the Bering Sea is widespread, a wide region from the Middle Shelf domain to the slope is considered to be a BIA. The highest densities of feeding fin whales in the Bering Sea likely occur from June through September. The BIA is considered as being in waters shallower than the 1,000-m isobath on the eastern Bering Sea shelf, and does not extend past approximately Unimak Pass in the Aleutian Islands. A gray whale feeding BIA is recognized along the north side of the Alaska Peninsula. Marine mammal behavior in these BIAs is similarly not expected to be affected by the proposed survey due to distance and timing.

Large aggregations of feeding humpback whales have historically been observed along the northern side of the eastern Aleutian Islands and Alaska Peninsula, and a feeding BIA is

recognized. Highest densities are expected from June through September. The eastern edge of the planned survey area is approximately 100 km west of the western edge of the recognized BIA, but it is possible that the survey could affect feeding humpback whales. For more information on BIAs, please see Ferguson et al. (2015a, 2015b).

#### Unusual Mortality Events (UME)

A UME is defined under the MMPA as "a stranding that is unexpected; involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response." For more information on UMEs, please visit: [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-unusual-mortality-events](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-unusual-mortality-events). Currently recognized UMEs in Alaska involving species under NMFS' jurisdiction include those affecting ice seals in the Bering and Chukchi Seas and gray whales. Since June 1, 2018, elevated strandings for bearded, ringed and spotted seals have occurred in the Bering and Chukchi seas in Alaska, with causes undetermined. For more information, please visit: [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/marine-life-distress/2018-2020-ice-seal-unusual-mortality-event-alaska](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/marine-life-distress/2018-2020-ice-seal-unusual-mortality-event-alaska).

Since January 1, 2019, elevated gray whale strandings have occurred along the west coast of North America from Mexico through Alaska. As of June 5, 2020, there have been a total of 340 whales reported in the event, with approximately 168 dead whales in Mexico, 159 whales in the United States (53 in California; 9 in Oregon; 42 in Washington, 55 in Alaska), and 13 whales in British Columbia, Canada. For the United States, the historical 18-year 5-month average (Jan–May) is 14.8 whales for the four states for this same time-period. Several dead whales have been emaciated with moderate to heavy whale lice (cyamid) loads. Necropsies have been conducted on a subset of whales with additional findings of vessel strike in three whales and entanglement in one whale. In Mexico, 50–55 percent of the free-ranging whales observed in the lagoons in winter have been reported as "skinny" compared to the annual average of 10–12 percent "skinny" whales normally seen. The cause of the UME is as yet undetermined. For more information, please visit: [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2019-2020-gray-whale-unusual-mortality-event-along-west-coast-and](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2019-2020-gray-whale-unusual-mortality-event-along-west-coast-and).

Another recent, notable UME involved large whales and occurred in the western Gulf of Alaska and off of

British Columbia, Canada. Beginning in May 2015, elevated large whale mortalities (primarily fin and humpback whales) occurred in the areas around Kodiak Island, Afognak Island, Chirikof Island, the Semidi Islands, and the southern shoreline of the Alaska Peninsula. Although most carcasses have been non-retrievable as they were discovered floating and in a state of moderate to severe decomposition, the UME is likely attributable to ecological factors, *i.e.*, the 2015 El Niño, "warm water blob," and the Pacific Coast domoic acid bloom. The UME was closed in 2016. More information is available online at [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2015-2016-large-whale-unusual-mortality-event-western-gulf-alaska](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2015-2016-large-whale-unusual-mortality-event-western-gulf-alaska).

#### Marine Mammal Hearing

Hearing is the most important sensory modality for marine mammals underwater, and exposure to anthropogenic sound can have deleterious effects. To appropriately assess the potential effects of exposure to sound, it is necessary to understand the frequency ranges marine mammals are able to hear. Current data indicate that not all marine mammal species have equal hearing capabilities (*e.g.*, Richardson et al., 1995; Wartzok and Ketten, 1999; Au and Hastings, 2008). To reflect this, Southall et al. (2007) recommended that marine mammals be divided into functional hearing groups based on directly measured or estimated hearing ranges on the basis of available behavioral response data, audiograms derived using auditory evoked potential techniques, anatomical modeling, and other data. Note that no direct measurements of hearing ability have been successfully completed for mysticetes (*i.e.*, low-frequency cetaceans). Subsequently, NMFS (2018) described generalized hearing ranges for these marine mammal hearing groups. Generalized hearing ranges were chosen based on the approximately 65 decibel (dB) threshold from the normalized composite audiograms, with the exception for lower limits for low-frequency cetaceans where the lower bound was deemed to be biologically implausible and the lower bound from Southall et al. (2007) retained. Marine mammal hearing groups and their associated hearing ranges are provided in Table 2.

**TABLE 2—MARINE MAMMAL HEARING GROUPS**  
**[NMFS, 2018]**

Hearing group	Generalized hearing range *
Low-frequency (LF) cetaceans .....	7 Hz to 35 kHz.
(baleen whales) .....	
Mid-frequency (MF) cetaceans .....	150 Hz to 160 kHz.
(dolphins, toothed whales, beaked whales, bottlenose whales) .....	
High-frequency (HF) cetaceans .....	275 Hz to 160 kHz.
(true porpoises, <i>Kogia</i> , river dolphins, cephalorhynchid, <i>Lagenorhynchus cruciger</i> & <i>L. australis</i> )	
Phocid pinnipeds (PW) (underwater) .....	50 Hz to 86 kHz.
(true seals) .....	
Otariid pinnipeds (OW) (underwater) .....	60 Hz to 39 kHz.
(sea lions and fur seals) .....	

\* Represents the generalized hearing range for the entire group as a composite (*i.e.*, all species within the group), where individual species' hearing ranges are typically not as broad. Generalized hearing range chosen based on ~65 dB threshold from normalized composite audiogram, with the exception for lower limits for LF cetaceans (Southall *et al.* 2007) and PW pinniped (approximation).

The pinniped functional hearing group was modified from Southall *et al.* (2007) on the basis of data indicating that phocid species have consistently demonstrated an extended frequency range of hearing compared to otariids, especially in the higher frequency range (Hemilä *et al.*, 2006; Kastelein *et al.*, 2009; Reichmuth and Holt, 2013).

For more detail concerning these groups and associated frequency ranges, please see NMFS (2018) for a review of available information. Twenty-three marine mammal species (17 cetacean and six pinniped (two otariid and four phocid) species) are considered herein. Of the cetacean species that may be present, seven are classified as low-frequency cetaceans (*i.e.*, all mysticete species), eight are classified as mid-frequency cetaceans (*i.e.*, all delphinid and ziphid species and the sperm whale), and two are classified as high-frequency cetaceans (*i.e.*, porpoises).

#### Potential Effects of Specified Activities on Marine Mammals and Their Habitat

Detailed descriptions of the potential effects of similar specified activities have been provided in other recent **Federal Register** notices, including for activities occurring within the same specified geographical region (*e.g.*, 83 FR 29212; 84 FR 14200; 85 FR 19580). Section 7 of L-DEO's application provides a comprehensive discussion of the potential effects of the proposed survey. We have reviewed L-DEO's application and believe it is accurate and complete. No significant new information is available. The information in L-DEO's application and in the referenced **Federal Register** notices are sufficient to inform our determinations regarding the potential effects of L-DEO's specified activity on marine mammals and their habitat. We refer the reader to these documents rather than repeating the information here. The referenced information

includes a summary and discussion of the ways that the specified activity may impact marine mammals and their habitat. Consistent with the analysis in our prior **Federal Register** notices for similar L-DEO surveys and after independently evaluating the analysis in L-DEO's application, we preliminarily determine that the survey is likely to result in the takes described in the "Estimated Take" section of this document and that other forms of take are not expected to occur.

The "Estimated Take" section includes a quantitative analysis of the number of individuals that are expected to be taken by this activity. The "Negligible Impact Analysis and Determination" section considers the potential effects of the specified activity, the "Estimated Take" section, and the "Proposed Mitigation" section, to draw conclusions regarding the likely impacts of these activities on the reproductive success or survivorship of individuals and how those impacts on individuals are likely to impact marine mammal species or stocks.

#### Description of Active Acoustic Sound Sources

This section contains a brief technical background on sound, on the characteristics of certain sound types, and on metrics used in this proposal inasmuch as the information is relevant to the specified activity and to a discussion of the potential effects of the specified activity on marine mammals found later in this document. For general information on sound and its interaction with the marine environment, please see, *e.g.*, Au and Hastings (2008); Richardson *et al.* (1995); Urick (1983).

Sound travels in waves, the basic components of which are frequency, wavelength, velocity, and amplitude. Frequency is the number of pressure waves that pass by a reference point per

unit of time and is measured in hertz or cycles per second. Wavelength is the distance between two peaks or corresponding points of a sound wave (length of one cycle). Higher frequency sounds have shorter wavelengths than lower frequency sounds, and typically attenuate (decrease) more rapidly, except in certain cases in shallower water. Amplitude is the height of the sound pressure wave or the "loudness" of a sound and is typically described using the relative unit of the decibel. A sound pressure level (SPL) in dB is described as the ratio between a measured pressure and a reference pressure (for underwater sound, this is 1 microPascal ( $\mu\text{Pa}$ )), and is a logarithmic unit that accounts for large variations in amplitude. Therefore, a relatively small change in dB corresponds to large changes in sound pressure. The source level (SL) represents the SPL referenced at a distance of 1 m from the source (referenced to 1  $\mu\text{Pa}$ ), while the received level is the SPL at the listener's position (referenced to 1  $\mu\text{Pa}$ ).

Root mean square (rms) is the quadratic mean sound pressure over the duration of an impulse. Root mean square is calculated by squaring all of the sound amplitudes, averaging the squares, and then taking the square root of the average (Urick, 1983). Root mean square accounts for both positive and negative values; squaring the pressures makes all values positive so that they may be accounted for in the summation of pressure levels (Hastings and Popper, 2005). This measurement is often used in the context of discussing behavioral effects, in part because behavioral effects, which often result from auditory cues, may be better expressed through averaged units than by peak pressures.

Sound exposure level (SEL; represented as dB re 1  $\mu\text{Pa}^2\text{-s}$ ) represents the total energy in a stated frequency

band over a stated time interval or event and considers both intensity and duration of exposure. The per-pulse SEL is calculated over the time window containing the entire pulse (*i.e.*, 100 percent of the acoustic energy). SEL is a cumulative metric; it can be accumulated over a single pulse, or calculated over periods containing multiple pulses. Cumulative SEL represents the total energy accumulated by a receiver over a defined time window or during an event. Peak sound pressure (also referred to as zero-to-peak sound pressure or 0-pk) is the maximum instantaneous sound pressure measurable in the water at a specified distance from the source and is represented in the same units as the rms sound pressure.

When underwater objects vibrate or activity occurs, sound-pressure waves are created. These waves alternately compress and decompress the water as the sound wave travels. Underwater sound waves radiate in a manner similar to ripples on the surface of a pond and may be either directed in a beam or beams or may radiate in all directions (omnidirectional sources), as is the case for sound produced by the pile driving activity considered here. The compressions and decompressions associated with sound waves are detected as changes in pressure by aquatic life and man-made sound receptors such as hydrophones.

Even in the absence of sound from the specified activity, the underwater environment is typically loud due to ambient sound, which is defined as environmental background sound levels lacking a single source or point (Richardson *et al.*, 1995). The sound level of a region is defined by the total acoustical energy being generated by known and unknown sources. These sources may include physical (*e.g.*, wind and waves, earthquakes, ice, atmospheric sound), biological (*e.g.*, sounds produced by marine mammals, fish, and invertebrates), and anthropogenic (*e.g.*, vessels, dredging, construction) sound. A number of sources contribute to ambient sound, including wind and waves, which are a main source of naturally occurring ambient sound for frequencies between 200 Hz and 50 kHz (Mitson, 1995). In general, ambient sound levels tend to increase with increasing wind speed and wave height. Precipitation can become an important component of total sound at frequencies above 500 Hz, and possibly down to 100 Hz during quiet times. Marine mammals can contribute significantly to ambient sound levels, as can some fish and snapping shrimp. The frequency band for biological

contributions is from approximately 12 Hz to over 100 kHz. Sources of ambient sound related to human activity include transportation (surface vessels), dredging and construction, oil and gas drilling and production, geophysical surveys, sonar, and explosions. Vessel noise typically dominates the total ambient sound for frequencies between 20 and 300 Hz. In general, the frequencies of anthropogenic sounds are below 1 kHz and, if higher frequency sound levels are created, they attenuate rapidly.

The sum of the various natural and anthropogenic sound sources that comprise ambient sound at any given location and time depends not only on the source levels (as determined by current weather conditions and levels of biological and human activity) but also on the ability of sound to propagate through the environment. In turn, sound propagation is dependent on the spatially and temporally varying properties of the water column and sea floor, and is frequency-dependent. As a result of the dependence on a large number of varying factors, ambient sound levels can be expected to vary widely over both coarse and fine spatial and temporal scales. Sound levels at a given frequency and location can vary by 10–20 dB from day to day (Richardson *et al.*, 1995). The result is that, depending on the source type and its intensity, sound from the specified activity may be a negligible addition to the local environment or could form a distinctive signal that may affect marine mammals. Details of source types are described in the following text.

Sounds are often considered to fall into one of two general types: Pulsed and non-pulsed (defined in the following). The distinction between these two sound types is important because they have differing potential to cause physical effects, particularly with regard to hearing (*e.g.*, Ward, 1997 in Southall *et al.*, 2007). Please see Southall *et al.* (2007) for an in-depth discussion of these concepts. The distinction between these two sound types is not always obvious, as certain signals share properties of both pulsed and non-pulsed sounds. A signal near a source could be categorized as a pulse, but due to propagation effects as it moves farther from the source, the signal duration becomes longer (*e.g.*, Greene and Richardson, 1988).

Pulsed sound sources (*e.g.*, airguns, explosions, gunshots, sonic booms, impact pile driving) produce signals that are brief (typically considered to be less than one second), broadband, atonal transients (ANSI, 1986, 2005; Harris, 1998; NIOSH, 1998; ISO, 2003) and

occur either as isolated events or repeated in some succession. Pulsed sounds are all characterized by a relatively rapid rise from ambient pressure to a maximal pressure value followed by a rapid decay period that may include a period of diminishing, oscillating maximal and minimal pressures, and generally have an increased capacity to induce physical injury as compared with sounds that lack these features.

Non-pulsed sounds can be tonal, narrowband, or broadband, brief or prolonged, and may be either continuous or intermittent (ANSI, 1995; NIOSH, 1998). Some of these non-pulsed sounds can be transient signals of short duration but without the essential properties of pulses (*e.g.*, rapid rise time). Examples of non-pulsed sounds include those produced by vessels, aircraft, machinery operations such as drilling or dredging, vibratory pile driving, and active sonar systems. The duration of such sounds, as received at a distance, can be greatly extended in a highly reverberant environment.

Airgun arrays produce pulsed signals with energy in a frequency range from about 10–2,000 Hz, with most energy radiated at frequencies below 200 Hz. The amplitude of the acoustic wave emitted from the source is equal in all directions (*i.e.*, omnidirectional), but airgun arrays do possess some directionality due to different phase delays between guns in different directions. Airgun arrays are typically tuned to maximize functionality for data acquisition purposes, meaning that sound transmitted in horizontal directions and at higher frequencies is minimized to the extent possible.

### Estimated Take

This section provides an estimate of the number of incidental takes proposed for authorization through this IHA, which will inform both NMFS' consideration of "small numbers" and the negligible impact determination.

Harassment is the only type of take expected to result from these activities. Except with respect to certain activities not pertinent here, section 3(18) of 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).

Authorized takes would primarily be by Level B harassment, as use of seismic airguns has the potential to result in disruption of behavioral patterns for individual marine mammals. There is also some potential for auditory injury (Level A harassment) for mysticetes and high frequency cetaceans (*i.e.*, porpoises). The proposed mitigation and monitoring measures are expected to minimize the severity of such taking to the extent practicable.

As described previously, no serious injury or mortality is anticipated or proposed to be authorized for this activity. Below we describe how the take is estimated.

Generally speaking, we estimate take by considering: (1) Acoustic thresholds above which NMFS believes the best available science indicates marine mammals will be behaviorally harassed or incur some degree of permanent hearing impairment; (2) the area or volume of water that will be ensonified above these levels in a day; (3) the density or occurrence of marine mammals within these ensonified areas; and, (4) and the number of days of activities. We note that while these basic factors can contribute to a basic calculation to provide an initial prediction of takes, additional

information that can qualitatively inform take estimates is also sometimes available (*e.g.*, previous monitoring results or average group size). Below, we describe the factors considered here in more detail and present the proposed take estimate.

#### Acoustic Thresholds

NMFS uses acoustic thresholds that identify the received level of underwater sound above which exposed marine mammals would be reasonably expected to be behaviorally harassed (equated to Level B harassment) or to incur PTS of some degree (equated to Level A harassment).

**Level B Harassment for non-explosive sources**—Though significantly driven by received level, the onset of behavioral disturbance from anthropogenic noise exposure is also informed to varying degrees by other factors related to the source (*e.g.*, frequency, predictability, duty cycle), the environment (*e.g.*, bathymetry), and the receiving animals (hearing, motivation, experience, demography, behavioral context) and can be difficult to predict (Southall *et al.*, 2007, Ellison *et al.*, 2012). NMFS uses a generalized acoustic threshold based on received level to estimate the onset of behavioral harassment. NMFS

predicts that marine mammals may be behaviorally harassed (*i.e.*, Level B harassment) when exposed to underwater anthropogenic noise above received levels 160 dB re 1 μPa (rms) for the impulsive sources (*i.e.*, seismic airguns) evaluated here.

**Level A harassment for non-explosive sources**—NMFS' Technical Guidance for Assessing the Effects of Anthropogenic Sound on Marine Mammal Hearing (Version 2.0) (Technical Guidance, 2018) identifies dual criteria to assess auditory injury (Level A harassment) to five different marine mammal groups (based on hearing sensitivity) as a result of exposure to noise from two different types of sources (impulsive or non-impulsive). L-DEO's proposed seismic survey includes the use of impulsive (seismic airguns) sources.

These thresholds are provided in the table below. The references, analysis, and methodology used in the development of the thresholds are described in NMFS 2018 Technical Guidance, which may be accessed at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-acoustic-technical-guidance>.

TABLE 3—THRESHOLDS IDENTIFYING THE ONSET OF PERMANENT THRESHOLD SHIFT

Hearing group	PTS onset acoustic thresholds * (received level)	
	Impulsive	Non-impulsive
Low-Frequency (LF) Cetaceans .....	<i>Cell 1:</i> $L_{pk,flat}$ : 219 dB; $L_{E,LF,24h}$ : 183 dB .....	<i>Cell 2:</i> $L_{E,LF,24h}$ : 199 dB.
Mid-Frequency (MF) Cetaceans .....	<i>Cell 3:</i> $L_{pk,flat}$ : 230 dB; $L_{E,MF,24h}$ : 185 dB .....	<i>Cell 4:</i> $L_{E,MF,24h}$ : 198 dB.
High-Frequency (HF) Cetaceans .....	<i>Cell 5:</i> $L_{pk,flat}$ : 202 dB; $L_{E,HF,24h}$ : 155 dB .....	<i>Cell 6:</i> $L_{E,HF,24h}$ : 173 dB.
Phocid Pinnipeds (PW) (Underwater) .....	<i>Cell 7:</i> $L_{pk,flat}$ : 218 dB; $L_{E,PW,24h}$ : 185 dB .....	<i>Cell 8:</i> $L_{E,PW,24h}$ : 201 dB.
Otariid Pinnipeds (OW) (Underwater) .....	<i>Cell 9:</i> $L_{pk,flat}$ : 232 dB; $L_{E,OW,24h}$ : 203 dB .....	<i>Cell 10:</i> $L_{E,OW,24h}$ : 219 dB.

\* Dual metric acoustic thresholds for impulsive sounds: Use whichever results in the largest isopleth for calculating PTS onset. If a non-impulsive sound has the potential of exceeding the peak sound pressure level thresholds associated with impulsive sounds, these thresholds should also be considered.

**Note:** Peak sound pressure ( $L_{pk}$ ) has a reference value of 1 μPa, and cumulative sound exposure level ( $L_E$ ) has a reference value of 1 μPa<sup>2</sup>s. In this Table, thresholds are abbreviated to reflect American National Standards Institute standards (ANSI 2013). However, peak sound pressure is defined by ANSI as incorporating frequency weighting, which is not the intent for this Technical Guidance. Hence, the subscript "flat" is being included to indicate peak sound pressure should be flat weighted or unweighted within the generalized hearing range. The subscript associated with cumulative sound exposure level thresholds indicates the designated marine mammal auditory weighting function (LF, MF, and HF cetaceans, and PW and OW pinnipeds) and that the recommended accumulation period is 24 hours. The cumulative sound exposure level thresholds could be exceeded in a multitude of ways (*i.e.*, varying exposure levels and durations, duty cycle). When possible, it is valuable for action proponents to indicate the conditions under which these acoustic thresholds will be exceeded.

#### Ensonified Area

Here, we describe operational and environmental parameters of the activity that will feed into identifying the area ensonified above the acoustic thresholds, which include source levels and acoustic propagation modeling.

L-DEO's modeling methodologies are described in greater detail in Appendix A of L-DEO's IHA application. The proposed 2D survey would acquire data using the 36-airgun array with a total

discharge volume of 6,600 in<sup>3</sup> at a maximum tow depth of 9 m. During approximately 10 percent of the planned survey tracklines, the array would be used at half the total volume (*i.e.*, an 18-airgun array with total volume of 3,300 in<sup>3</sup>). L-DEO's modeling approach uses ray tracing for the direct wave traveling from the array to the receiver and its associated source ghost (reflection at the air-water interface in the vicinity of the array), in a constant-velocity half-space (infinite

homogeneous ocean layer, unbounded by a seafloor). To validate the model results, L-DEO measured propagation of pulses from the 36-airgun array at a tow depth of 6 m in the Gulf of Mexico, for deep water (~1,600 m), intermediate water depth on the slope (~600–1,100 m), and shallow water (~50 m) (Tolstoy *et al.*, 2009; Diebold *et al.*, 2010).

L-DEO collected a MCS data set from R/V *Langseth* on an 8 km streamer in 2012 on the shelf of the Cascadia Margin off of Washington in water up to 200 m

deep that allowed Crone *et al.* (2014) to analyze the hydrophone streamer (>1,100 individual shots). These empirical data were then analyzed to determine *in situ* sound levels for shallow and upper intermediate water depths. These data suggest that modeled radii were 2–3 times larger than the measured radii in shallow water. Similarly, data collected by Crone *et al.* (2017) during a survey off New Jersey in 2014 and 2015 confirmed that *in situ* measurements collected by R/V *Langseth* hydrophone streamer were 2–3 times smaller than the predicted radii.

L–DEO model results are used to determine the assumed radial distance to the 160-dB rms threshold for these arrays in deep water (>1,000 m) (down to a maximum water depth of 2,000 m). Water depths in the project area may be up to 7,100 m, but marine mammals in the region are generally not anticipated to dive below 2,000 m (Costa and Williams, 1999). For the 36-airgun array, the estimated radial distance for intermediate (100–1,000 m) and shallow (<100 m) water depths is taken from Crone *et al.* (2014). L–DEO typically derives estimated distances for

intermediate water depths by applying a correction factor of 1.5 to the model results for deep water. The Crone *et al.* (2014) empirical data produce results consistent with L–DEO's typical approach (8,233 m versus 8,444 m). For the 18-airgun array, the radii for shallow and intermediate-water depths are taken from Crone *et al.* (2014) and scaled to account for the difference in airgun volume.

The estimated distances to the Level B harassment isopleths for the arrays are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4—PREDICTED RADIAL DISTANCES TO ISOLETHS CORRESPONDING TO LEVEL B HARASSMENT THRESHOLD

Source and volume	Tow depth (m)	Water depth (m)	Level B harassment zone (m)
36 airgun array; 6,600 in <sup>3</sup> .....	9	>1000 100–1000 <100	15,629 3,8233 <sup>3</sup> 11,000
18 airgun array; 3,300 in <sup>3</sup> .....	9	>1000 100–1000 <100	13,562 23,939 <sup>2</sup> 5,263

<sup>1</sup> Distance based on L–DEO model results.

<sup>2</sup> Based on empirical data from Crone *et al.* (2014) with scaling factor based on deep-water modeling applied to account for differences in array size.

<sup>3</sup> Based on empirical data from Crone *et al.* (2014).

Predicted distances to Level A harassment isopleths, which vary based on marine mammal hearing groups, were calculated based on modeling performed by L–DEO using the NUCLEUS source modeling software program and the NMFS User Spreadsheet, described below. The acoustic thresholds for impulsive sounds (*e.g.*, airguns) contained in the Technical Guidance were presented as dual metric acoustic thresholds using both SEL<sub>cum</sub> and peak sound pressure metrics (NMFS 2018). As dual metrics, NMFS considers onset of PTS (Level A harassment) to have occurred when either one of the two metrics is exceeded (*i.e.*, metric resulting in the largest isopleth). The SEL<sub>cum</sub> metric considers both level and duration of exposure, as well as auditory weighting functions by marine mammal hearing group. In recognition of the fact that the requirement to calculate Level A harassment ensonified areas could be more technically challenging to predict due to the duration component and the use of weighting functions in the new SEL<sub>cum</sub> thresholds, NMFS developed an optional User Spreadsheet that includes tools to help predict a simple isopleth that can be used in conjunction with marine mammal density or occurrence to facilitate the estimation of take numbers.

The values for SEL<sub>cum</sub> and peak SPL for the *Langseth* airgun arrays were derived from calculating the modified far-field signature. The farfield signature is often used as a theoretical representation of the source level. To compute the farfield signature, the source level is estimated at a large distance below the array (*e.g.*, 9 km), and this level is back projected mathematically to a notional distance of 1 m from the array's geometrical center. However, when the source is an array of multiple airguns separated in space, the source level from the theoretical farfield signature is not necessarily the best measurement of the source level that is physically achieved at the source (Tolstoy *et al.*, 2009). Near the source (at short ranges, distances <1 km), the pulses of sound pressure from each individual airgun in the source array do not stack constructively, as they do for the theoretical farfield signature. The pulses from the different airguns spread out in time such that the source levels observed or modeled are the result of the summation of pulses from a few airguns, not the full array (Tolstoy *et al.*, 2009). At larger distances, away from the source array center, sound pressure of all the airguns in the array stack coherently, but not within one time sample, resulting in smaller source levels (a few dB) than the source level derived from the farfield signature.

Because the farfield signature does not take into account the large array effect near the source and is calculated as a point source, the modified farfield signature is a more appropriate measure of the sound source level for distributed sound sources, such as airgun arrays. L–DEO used the acoustic modeling methodology as used for estimating Level B harassment distances with a small grid step of 1 m in both the inline and depth directions. The propagation modeling takes into account all airgun interactions at short distances from the source, including interactions between subarrays, which are modeled using the NUCLEUS software to estimate the notional signature and MATLAB software to calculate the pressure signal at each mesh point of a grid.

In order to more realistically incorporate the Technical Guidance's weighting functions over the seismic array's full acoustic band, unweighted spectrum data for the *Langseth*'s airgun array (modeled in 1 Hz bands) was used to make adjustments (dB) to the unweighted spectrum levels, by frequency, according to the weighting functions for each relevant marine mammal hearing group. These adjusted/weighted spectrum levels were then converted to pressures (μPa) in order to integrate them over the entire broadband spectrum, resulting in broadband weighted source levels by

hearing group that could be directly incorporated within the User Spreadsheet (*i.e.*, to override the Spreadsheet's more simple weighting factor adjustment). Using the User Spreadsheet's "safe distance" methodology for mobile sources (described by Sivle *et al.*, 2014) with the hearing group-specific weighted source levels, and inputs assuming spherical spreading propagation and source

velocities and shot intervals specific to the planned survey, potential radial distances to auditory injury zones were then calculated for SEL<sub>cum</sub> thresholds.

Inputs to the User Spreadsheets in the form of estimated source levels are shown in Appendix A of L-DEO's application. User Spreadsheets used by L-DEO to estimate distances to Level A harassment isopleths for the airgun arrays are also provided in Appendix A

of the application. Outputs from the User Spreadsheets in the form of estimated distances to Level A harassment isopleths for the survey are shown in Table 5. As described above, NMFS considers onset of PTS (Level A harassment) to have occurred when either one of the dual metrics (SEL<sub>cum</sub> and Peak SPL<sub>flat</sub>) is exceeded (*i.e.*, metric resulting in the largest isopleth).

TABLE 5—MODELED RADIAL DISTANCES (m) TO ISOLETHS CORRESPONDING TO LEVEL A HARASSMENT THRESHOLDS

Source (volume)	Threshold	Level A harassment zone (m)				
		LF cetaceans	MF cetaceans	HF cetaceans	Phocids	Otariids
36-airgun array (6,600 in <sup>3</sup> ) ....	SEL <sub>cum</sub> .....	376	0	1	10	0
	Peak .....	39	14	229	42	11
18-airgun array (3,300 in <sup>3</sup> ) ....	SEL <sub>cum</sub> .....	55	0	0	2	0
	Peak .....	23	11	119	25	10

Note that because of some of the assumptions included in the methods used (*e.g.*, stationary receiver with no vertical or horizontal movement in response to the acoustic source), isopleths produced may be overestimates to some degree, which will ultimately result in some degree of overestimation of Level A harassment. However, these tools offer the best way to predict appropriate isopleths when more sophisticated modeling methods are not available, and NMFS continues to develop ways to quantitatively refine these tools and will qualitatively address the output where appropriate. For mobile sources, such as the proposed seismic survey, the User Spreadsheet predicts the closest distance at which a stationary animal would not incur PTS if the sound source traveled by the animal in a straight line at a constant speed.

Auditory injury is unlikely to occur for mid-frequency cetaceans, otariid pinnipeds, and phocid pinnipeds given very small modeled zones of injury for those species (all estimated zones less than 15 m for mid-frequency cetaceans and otariid pinnipeds, up to a maximum of 42 m for phocid pinnipeds), in context of distributed source dynamics. The source level of the array is a theoretical definition assuming a point source and measurement in the far-field of the source (MacGillivray, 2006). As described by Caldwell and Dragoset (2000), an array is not a point source, but one that spans a small area. In the far-field, individual elements in arrays will effectively work as one source because individual pressure peaks will have coalesced into one relatively broad pulse. The array can then be considered

a "point source." For distances within the near-field, *i.e.*, approximately 2–3 times the array dimensions, pressure peaks from individual elements do not arrive simultaneously because the observation point is not equidistant from each element. The effect is destructive interference of the outputs of each element, so that peak pressures in the near-field will be significantly lower than the output of the largest individual element. Here, the 230 dB peak isopleth distances would in all cases be expected to be within the near-field of the array where the definition of source level breaks down. Therefore, actual locations within this distance of the array center where the sound level exceeds 230 dB peak SPL would not necessarily exist. In general, Caldwell and Dragoset (2000) suggest that the near-field for airgun arrays is considered to extend out to approximately 250 m.

In order to provide quantitative support for this theoretical argument, we calculated expected maximum distances at which the near-field would transition to the far-field (Table 5). For a specific array one can estimate the distance at which the near-field transitions to the far-field by:

$$D = \frac{L^2}{4\lambda}$$

with the condition that  $D \gg \lambda$ , and where  $D$  is the distance,  $L$  is the longest dimension of the array, and  $\lambda$  is the wavelength of the signal (Lurton, 2002). Given that  $\lambda$  can be defined by:

$$\lambda = \frac{v}{f}$$

where  $f$  is the frequency of the sound signal and  $v$  is the speed of the sound in the medium of interest, one can rewrite the equation for  $D$  as:

$$D = \frac{fL^2}{4v}$$

and calculate  $D$  directly given a particular frequency and known speed of sound (here assumed to be 1,500 meters per second in water, although this varies with environmental conditions).

To determine the closest distance to the arrays at which the source level predictions in Table 5 are valid (*i.e.*, maximum extent of the near-field), we calculated  $D$  based on an assumed frequency of 1 kHz. A frequency of 1 kHz is commonly used in near-field/far-field calculations for airgun arrays (Zykov and Carr, 2014; MacGillivray, 2006; NSF and USGS, 2011), and based on representative airgun spectrum data and field measurements of an airgun array used on the *Langseth*, nearly all (greater than 95 percent) of the energy from airgun arrays is below 1 kHz (Tolstoy *et al.*, 2009). Thus, using 1 kHz as the upper cut-off for calculating the maximum extent of the near-field should reasonably represent the near-field extent in field conditions.

If the largest distance to the peak sound pressure level threshold was equal to or less than the longest dimension of the array (*i.e.*, under the array), or within the near-field, then received levels that meet or exceed the threshold in most cases are not expected to occur. This is because within the near-field and within the dimensions of the array, the source levels specified in Appendix A of L-DEO's application are

overestimated and not applicable. In fact, until one reaches a distance of approximately three or four times the near-field distance the average intensity of sound at any given distance from the array is still less than that based on calculations that assume a directional point source (Lurton, 2002). The 6,600-in<sup>3</sup> airgun array used during 90 percent of the proposed survey has an approximate diagonal of 28.8 m, resulting in a near-field distance of 138.7 m at 1 kHz (NSF and USGS, 2011). Field measurements of this array indicate that the source behaves like multiple discrete sources, rather than a directional point source, beginning at approximately 400 m (deep site) to 1 km (shallow site) from the center of the array (Tolstoy *et al.*, 2009), distances that are actually greater than four times the calculated 140-m near-field distance. Within these distances, the recorded received levels were always lower than would be predicted based on calculations that assume a directional point source, and increasingly so as one moves closer towards the array (Tolstoy *et al.*, 2009). Given this, relying on the calculated distance (138.7 m) as the distance at which we expect to be in the near-field is a conservative approach since even beyond this distance the acoustic modeling still overestimates the actual received level. Within the near-field, in order to explicitly evaluate the likelihood of exceeding any particular acoustic threshold, one would need to consider the exact position of the animal, its relationship to individual array elements, and how the individual acoustic sources propagate and their acoustic fields interact. Given that within the near-field and dimensions of the array source levels would be below those assumed here, we believe exceedance of the peak pressure threshold would only be possible under highly unlikely circumstances.

In consideration of the received sound levels in the near-field as described above, we expect the potential for Level A harassment of mid-frequency cetaceans, otariid pinnipeds, and phocid pinnipeds to be de minimis, even before the likely moderating effects of aversion and/or other compensatory behaviors (e.g., Nachtigall *et al.*, 2018) are considered. We do not believe that Level A harassment is a likely outcome for any mid-frequency cetacean, otariid pinniped, or phocid pinniped and do not propose to authorize any Level A harassment for these species.

#### Marine Mammal Occurrence

In this section we provide the information about the presence, density, and group dynamics of marine

mammals that will inform the take calculations. For additional detail, please see Appendix B of L-DEO's application.

Habitat-based stratified marine mammal densities developed by the U.S. Navy for assessing potential impacts of training activities in the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) (DoN, 2014; Rone *et al.*, 2014) were used by L-DEO for estimating potential marine mammal exposures. The Navy's Marine Species Density Database (DoN, 2014) is currently the most comprehensive compendium for density data available for the GOA; density estimates specific to the survey location in the Aleutian Islands are not available. Density values are provided in Table B-1 of L-DEO's application.

The Navy conducted two comprehensive marine mammal surveys in their Temporary Marine Activities Area (TMAA) in the GOA prior to 2014. The first survey was conducted in April 2009 and the second was from June to July 2013. Both surveys used systematic line-transect survey protocols including visual and acoustic detection methods (Rone *et al.*, 2010, 2014). The data were collected in four strata that were designed to encompass the four distinct habitats within the TMAA and greater GOA. Rone *et al.* (2014) provided stratified line-transect density estimates used in this analysis for fin, humpback, blue, sperm, and killer whales, as well as northern fur seals. Data from a subsequent survey in 2015 were used to calculate alternative density estimates for several species (Rone *et al.*, 2017). However, the reported densities for blue, fin and humpback whales were not prorated for unidentified large whale sightings so the densities from Rone *et al.* (2014) were maintained.

Rone *et al.* (2014) defined four strata: Inshore: All waters <1,000 m deep; Slope: From 1,000 m water depth to the Aleutian trench/subduction zone; Offshore: Waters offshore of the Aleutian trench/subduction zone; Seamount: Waters within defined seamount areas. Densities corresponding to these strata were based on data from several different sources, including Navy funded line-transect surveys in the GOA as described above. Compared to the GOA study area (Rone *et al.*, 2014), the proposed survey area does not have a consistent gradual decrease in water depth ("slope" habitat) from the 1,000 m isobath to the Aleutian Trench, south of the Aleutian Islands. Instead, water depths initially decrease rapidly beyond the 1,000-m isobath to ~4,000 m, then rise again on Hawley Ridge before dropping in the Aleutian Trench. Additionally, waters

north of the Aleutian Islands and beyond 1,000 m drop rapidly to ~3,000 m and remain at those depths to the northern extent of the survey lines. For those reasons, and because the Rone *et al.* (2014) inshore densities were for all waters <1,000 m, the marine mammal densities for the Inshore region were used for both shallow (<100 m) and intermediate (100–1,000 m) water depths, while offshore densities were used for all deepwater areas >1,000 m.

There were insufficient sightings data from the 2009, 2013 and 2015 line-transect surveys to calculate reliable density estimates for other marine mammal species in the GOA. DoN (2014) derived gray whale densities in two zones, nearshore (0–2.25 nmi from shore) and offshore (from 2.25–20 nmi from shore). L-DEO used the nearshore density to represent shallow water (<100 m deep), and the offshore density for intermediate and deep water. Harbor porpoise densities in DoN (2014) were derived from Hobbs and Waite (2010) which included additional shallow water depth strata. The density estimate from the 100–200 m depth strata was used for both shallow and intermediate-depth water in this analysis. Similarly, harbor seals typically remain close to shore so minimal estimates for deep water and a one thousand fold increase of the minimal density was used for shallow and intermediate waters (DoN, 2014). The density estimates for Dall's porpoise in Rone *et al.* (2017) were somewhat larger than those in Rone *et al.* (2014), so the larger densities are used here.

Densities for minke whale, Pacific white-sided dolphin, and Cuvier's and Baird's beaked whales were based on Waite (2003 in DoN, 2009). Although sei whale sightings and Stejneger's beaked whale acoustic detections were recorded during the Navy-funded GOA surveys, data were insufficient to calculate densities for these species, so predictions from a global model of marine mammal densities were used (Kaschner *et al.*, 2012 in DoN, 2014). Steller sea lion and northern elephant seal densities were calculated using shore-based population estimates divided by the area of the GOA Large Marine Ecosystem (DoN, 2014). For the Steller sea lion in particular, we invite comment on the suitability of these data and regarding the availability of alternative density information, if any. The North Pacific right whale and Risso's dolphin are only rarely observed in or near the survey area, so minimal densities were used to represent their potential presence (DoN, 2014). No regional density information is available

for the northern right whale dolphin, spotted seal, or ribbon seal.

All densities were corrected for perception bias [ $f(0)$ ] but only harbor porpoise densities were corrected for availability bias [ $g(0)$ ], as described by the respective authors. There is some uncertainty related to the estimated density data and the assumptions used in their calculations, as with all density data estimates. However, the approach used here is based on the best available data that are stratified by the water depth (habitat) zones present within the survey area.

#### *Take Calculation and Estimation*

Here we describe how the information provided above is brought together to produce a quantitative take estimate. In order to estimate the number of marine mammals predicted to be exposed to sound levels that would result in Level A or Level B harassment, radial distances from the airgun array to predicted isopleths corresponding to the Level A harassment and Level B harassment thresholds are calculated, as described above. Those radial distances are then used to calculate the area(s) around the airgun array predicted to be

ensonified to sound levels that exceed the Level A and Level B harassment thresholds. The distance for the 160-dB threshold (based on L-DEO model results) was used to draw a buffer around every transect line in GIS to determine the total ensonified area in each depth category. Estimated incidents of exposure above Level A and Level B harassment criteria are presented in Table 6. For additional details regarding calculations of ensonified area, please see Appendix D of L-DEO's application. As noted previously, L-DEO has added 25 percent in the form of operational days, which is equivalent to adding 25 percent to the proposed line-kms to be surveyed. This accounts for the possibility that additional operational days are required, but likely results in an overestimate of actual exposures.

The estimated marine mammal exposures above harassment thresholds are generally assumed here to equate to take, and the estimates form the basis for our proposed take authorization numbers. For the species for which NMFS does not expect there to be a reasonable potential for take by Level A harassment to occur, i.e., mid-frequency

cetaceans and all pinnipeds, the estimated exposures above Level A harassment thresholds have been added to the estimated exposures above the Level B harassment threshold to produce a total number of incidents of take by Level B harassment that is proposed for authorization. Estimated exposures and proposed take numbers for authorization are shown in Table 6. Regarding humpback whale take numbers, we assume that whales encountered will follow Wade (2017), i.e., that 86.8 percent of takes would accrue to the Hawaii DPS, 11 percent to the Mexico DPS, and 2.1 percent to the WNP DPS. Of the estimated take of gray whales, we assume that 1.1 percent of encountered whales would be from the WNP stock (Carretta et al., 2019) and propose to authorize take accordingly. Note that the aforementioned modification to certain tracklines to maintain a larger buffer around specific Steller sea lion haul-outs and rookeries has not been accounted for in the take estimation process and, therefore, actual acoustic exposures of Steller sea lions above harassment thresholds would likely be less than assumed here.

TABLE 6—ESTIMATED TAKING BY LEVEL A AND LEVEL B HARASSMENT, AND PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION

Species	Stock <sup>1</sup>	Estimated level B harassment	Estimated level A harassment	Proposed level B harassment	Proposed level A harassment	Total take	Percent of stock <sup>1</sup>
North Pacific right whale <sup>2</sup>	.....	1	0	2	0	2	6.5
Humpback whale	WNP	2,580	140	2,580	140	2,719	245.6
	CNP	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	26.9
Blue whale	.....	25	2	25	2	27	1.8
Fin whale <sup>5</sup>	.....	2,037	118	2,037	118	2,155	n/a
Sei whale	.....	5	0	5	0	5	1
Minke whale <sup>5</sup>	.....	30	2	30	2	32	n/a
Gray whale	ENP	223	3	223	3	226	0.8
	WNP	3	0	3	0	3	1
Sperm whale <sup>5</sup>	.....	39	3	42	0	42	n/a
Baird's beaked whale <sup>5</sup>	.....	25	2	27	0	27	n/a
Stejneger's beaked whale <sup>5</sup>	.....	43	3	46	0	46	n/a
Cuvier's beaked whale <sup>5</sup>	.....	110	7	117	0	117	n/a
Pacific white-sided dolphin	.....	1,038	64	1,103	0	1,103	4.1
Northern right whale dolphin <sup>3</sup>	.....	.....	.....	58	0	58	0.2
Risso's dolphin <sup>3</sup>	.....	1	0	22	0	22	0.3
Killer whale	Offshore ..	159	9	169	0	169	56.3
	Transient ..	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	28.8
	Resident ..	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	7.2
Dall's porpoise	.....	5,424	308	5,424	308	5,732	6.9
Harbor porpoise	.....	935	51	935	51	985	2
Northern fur seal	.....	809	51	860	0	860	0.1
Steller sea lion	.....	489	30	520	0	520	1
Northern elephant seal	.....	110	7	117	0	117	0.1
Harbor seal	.....	198	11	209	0	209	3.7
Spotted seal <sup>4</sup>	.....	.....	.....	5	0	5	0.0
Ribbon seal <sup>4</sup>	.....	.....	.....	5	0	5	0.0

<sup>1</sup> In most cases, where multiple stocks are being affected, for the purposes of calculating the percentage of the stock impacted, the take is being analyzed as if all proposed takes occurred within each stock. Where necessary, additional discussion is provided in the "Small Numbers Analysis" section.

<sup>2</sup> Estimated exposure of one whale increased to group size of two (Shelden et al., 2005; Waite et al., 2003; Wade et al., 2011).

<sup>3</sup> L-DEO requests authorization of northern right whale dolphin take equivalent to exposure of one group, and estimated exposure of one Risso's dolphin increased to group size of 22 (Barlow, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> L-DEO requests authorization of five takes each of spotted seal and ribbon seal.

<sup>5</sup> As noted in Table 1, there is no estimate of abundance available for these species.

## Proposed Mitigation

In order to issue an IHA under Section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA, NMFS must set forth the permissible methods of taking pursuant to the activity, and other means of effecting the least practicable impact on the species or stock and its habitat, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance, and on the availability of the species or stock for taking for certain subsistence uses (latter not applicable for this action). NMFS regulations require applicants for incidental take authorizations to include information about the availability and feasibility (economic and technological) of equipment, methods, and manner of conducting the activity or other means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact upon the affected species or stocks and their habitat (50 CFR 216.104(a)(11)).

In evaluating how mitigation may or may not be appropriate to ensure the least practicable adverse impact on species or stocks and their habitat, as well as subsistence uses where applicable, we carefully consider two primary factors:

(1) The manner in which, and the degree to which, the successful implementation of the measure(s) is expected to reduce impacts to marine mammals, marine mammal species or stocks, and their habitat. This considers the nature of the potential adverse impact being mitigated (likelihood, scope, range). It further considers the likelihood that the measure will be effective if implemented (probability of accomplishing the mitigating result if implemented as planned), the likelihood of effective implementation (probability implemented as planned); and

(2) The practicability of the measures for applicant implementation, which may consider such things as cost, impact on operations, and, in the case of a military readiness activity, personnel safety, practicality of implementation, and impact on the effectiveness of the military readiness activity.

In order to satisfy the MMPA's least practicable adverse impact standard, NMFS has evaluated a suite of basic mitigation protocols for seismic surveys that are required regardless of the status of a stock. Additional or enhanced protections may be required for species whose stocks are in particularly poor health and/or are subject to some significant additional stressor that lessens that stock's ability to weather the effects of the specified activities

without worsening its status. We reviewed seismic mitigation protocols required or recommended elsewhere (e.g., HESS, 1999; DOC, 2013; IBAMA, 2018; Kyhn *et al.*, 2011; JNCC, 2017; DEWHA, 2008; BOEM, 2016; DFO, 2008; GHFS, 2015; MMOA, 2016; Nowacek *et al.*, 2013; Nowacek and Southall, 2016), recommendations received during public comment periods for previous actions, and the available scientific literature. We also considered recommendations given in a number of review articles (e.g., Weir and Dolman, 2007; Compton *et al.*, 2008; Parsons *et al.*, 2009; Wright and Cosentino, 2015; Stone, 2015b). This exhaustive review and consideration of public comments regarding previous, similar activities has led to development of the protocols included here.

As described previously, L-DEO has agreed to modify certain tracklines in order to reduce the number and intensity of acoustic exposures of Steller sea lions in waters around the specific haul-outs and rookeries of greatest importance for the stock. Tracklines were modified to ensure that the vessel maintains a standoff distance sufficient to prevent the assumed Level B harassment zone from overlapping with a 3,000-foot (0.9-km) buffer around those haul-outs and rookeries.

### Vessel-Based Visual Mitigation Monitoring

Visual monitoring requires the use of trained observers (herein referred to as visual PSOs) to scan the ocean surface for the presence of marine mammals. The area to be scanned visually includes primarily the exclusion zone, within which observation of certain marine mammals requires shutdown of the acoustic source, but also a buffer zone. The buffer zone means an area beyond the exclusion zone to be monitored for the presence of marine mammals that may enter the exclusion zone. During pre-clearance monitoring (*i.e.*, before ramp-up begins), the buffer zone also acts as an extension of the exclusion zone in that observations of marine mammals within the buffer zone would also prevent airgun operations from beginning (*i.e.*, ramp-up). The buffer zone encompasses the area at and below the sea surface from the edge of the 0–500 m exclusion zone, out to a radius of 1,000 m from the edges of the airgun array (500–1,000 m). Visual monitoring of the exclusion zone and adjacent waters is intended to establish and, when visual conditions allow, maintain zones around the sound source that are clear of marine mammals, thereby reducing or eliminating the potential for injury and minimizing the potential for

more severe behavioral reactions for animals occurring closer to the vessel. Visual monitoring of the buffer zone is intended to (1) provide additional protection to naïve marine mammals that may be in the area during pre-clearance, and (2) during airgun use, aid in establishing and maintaining the exclusion zone by alerting the visual observer and crew of marine mammals that are outside of, but may approach and enter, the exclusion zone.

L-DEO must use dedicated, trained, NMFS-approved Protected Species Observers (PSOs). The PSOs must have no tasks other than to conduct observational effort, record observational data, and communicate with and instruct relevant vessel crew with regard to the presence of marine mammals and mitigation requirements. PSO resumes shall be provided to NMFS for approval.

At least one of the visual and two of the acoustic PSOs (discussed below) aboard the vessel must have a minimum of 90 days at-sea experience working in those roles, respectively, with no more than 18 months elapsed since the conclusion of the at-sea experience. One visual PSO with such experience shall be designated as the lead for the entire protected species observation team. The lead PSO shall serve as primary point of contact for the vessel operator and ensure all PSO requirements per the IHA are met. To the maximum extent practicable, the experienced PSOs should be scheduled to be on duty with those PSOs with appropriate training but who have not yet gained relevant experience.

During survey operations (*e.g.*, any day on which use of the acoustic source is planned to occur, and whenever the acoustic source is in the water, whether activated or not), a minimum of two visual PSOs must be on duty and conducting visual observations at all times during daylight hours (*i.e.*, from 30 minutes prior to sunrise through 30 minutes following sunset). Visual monitoring of the exclusion and buffer zones must begin no less than 30 minutes prior to ramp-up and must continue until one hour after use of the acoustic source ceases or until 30 minutes past sunset. Visual PSOs shall coordinate to ensure 360° visual coverage around the vessel from the most appropriate observation posts, and shall conduct visual observations using binoculars and the naked eye while free from distractions and in a consistent, systematic, and diligent manner.

PSOs shall establish and monitor the exclusion and buffer zones. These zones shall be based upon the radial distance from the edges of the acoustic source

(rather than being based on the center of the array or around the vessel itself). During use of the acoustic source (*i.e.*, anytime airguns are active, including ramp-up), detections of marine mammals within the buffer zone (but outside the exclusion zone) shall be communicated to the operator to prepare for the potential shutdown of the acoustic source.

During use of the airgun (*i.e.*, anytime the acoustic source is active, including ramp-up), detections of marine mammals within the buffer zone (but outside the exclusion zone) should be communicated to the operator to prepare for the potential shutdown of the acoustic source. Visual PSOs will immediately communicate all observations to the on duty acoustic PSO(s), including any determination by the PSO regarding species identification, distance, and bearing and the degree of confidence in the determination. Any observations of marine mammals by crew members shall be relayed to the PSO team. During good conditions (*e.g.*, daylight hours; Beaufort sea state (BSS) 3 or less), visual PSOs shall conduct observations when the acoustic source is not operating for comparison of sighting rates and behavior with and without use of the acoustic source and between acquisition periods, to the maximum extent practicable.

Visual PSOs may be on watch for a maximum of four consecutive hours followed by a break of at least one hour between watches and may conduct a maximum of 12 hours of observation per 24-hour period. Combined observational duties (visual and acoustic but not at same time) may not exceed 12 hours per 24-hour period for any individual PSO.

#### *Passive Acoustic Monitoring*

Acoustic monitoring means the use of trained personnel (sometimes referred to as passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) operators, herein referred to as acoustic PSOs) to operate PAM equipment to acoustically detect the presence of marine mammals. Acoustic monitoring involves acoustically detecting marine mammals regardless of distance from the source, as localization of animals may not always be possible. Acoustic monitoring is intended to further support visual monitoring (during daylight hours) in maintaining an exclusion zone around the sound source that is clear of marine mammals. In cases where visual monitoring is not effective (*e.g.*, due to weather, nighttime), acoustic monitoring may be used to allow certain activities to occur, as further detailed below.

Passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) would take place in addition to the visual monitoring program. Visual monitoring typically is not effective during periods of poor visibility or at night, and even with good visibility, is unable to detect marine mammals when they are below the surface or beyond visual range. Acoustical monitoring can be used in addition to visual observations to improve detection, identification, and localization of cetaceans. The acoustic monitoring would serve to alert visual PSOs (if on duty) when vocalizing cetaceans are detected. It is only useful when marine mammals call, but it can be effective either by day or by night, and does not depend on good visibility. It would be monitored in real time so that the visual observers can be advised when cetaceans are detected.

The R/V *Langseth* will use a towed PAM system, which must be monitored by at a minimum one on duty acoustic PSO beginning at least 30 minutes prior to ramp-up and at all times during use of the acoustic source. Acoustic PSOs may be on watch for a maximum of four consecutive hours followed by a break of at least one hour between watches and may conduct a maximum of 12 hours of observation per 24-hour period. Combined observational duties (acoustic and visual but not at same time) may not exceed 12 hours per 24-hour period for any individual PSO.

Survey activity may continue for 30 minutes when the PAM system malfunctions or is damaged, while the PAM operator diagnoses the issue. If the diagnosis indicates that the PAM system must be repaired to solve the problem, operations may continue for an additional five hours without acoustic monitoring during daylight hours only under the following conditions:

- Sea state is less than or equal to BSS 4;
- No marine mammals (excluding delphinids) detected solely by PAM in the applicable exclusion zone in the previous two hours;
- NMFS is notified via email as soon as practicable with the time and location in which operations began occurring without an active PAM system; and
- Operations with an active acoustic source, but without an operating PAM system, do not exceed a cumulative total of five hours in any 24-hour period.

#### *Establishment of Exclusion and Buffer Zones*

An exclusion zone (EZ) is a defined area within which occurrence of a marine mammal triggers mitigation action intended to reduce the potential

for certain outcomes, *e.g.*, auditory injury, disruption of critical behaviors. The PSOs would establish a minimum EZ with a 500-m radius. The 500-m EZ would be based on radial distance from the edge of the airgun array (rather than being based on the center of the array or around the vessel itself). With certain exceptions (described below), if a marine mammal appears within or enters this zone, the acoustic source would be shut down.

The 500-m EZ is intended to be precautionary in the sense that it would be expected to contain sound exceeding the injury criteria for all cetacean hearing groups, (based on the dual criteria of SEL<sub>cum</sub> and peak SPL), while also providing a consistent, reasonably observable zone within which PSOs would typically be able to conduct effective observational effort. Additionally, a 500-m EZ is expected to minimize the likelihood that marine mammals will be exposed to levels likely to result in more severe behavioral responses. Although significantly greater distances may be observed from an elevated platform under good conditions, we believe that 500 m is likely regularly attainable for PSOs using the naked eye during typical conditions.

An extended EZ of 1,500 m must be enforced for all beaked whales. No buffer of this extended EZ is required.

#### *Pre-Clearance and Ramp-Up*

Ramp-up (sometimes referred to as “soft start”) means the gradual and systematic increase of emitted sound levels from an airgun array. Ramp-up begins by first activating a single airgun of the smallest volume, followed by doubling the number of active elements in stages until the full complement of an array’s airguns are active. Each stage should be approximately the same duration, and the total duration should not be less than approximately 20 minutes. The intent of pre-clearance observation (30 minutes) is to ensure no protected species are observed within the buffer zone prior to the beginning of ramp-up. During pre-clearance the only time observations of protected species in the buffer zone would prevent operations (*i.e.*, the beginning of ramp-up). The intent of ramp-up is to warn protected species of pending seismic operations and to allow sufficient time for those animals to leave the immediate vicinity. A ramp-up procedure, involving a step-wise increase in the number of airguns firing and total array volume until all operational airguns are activated and the full volume is achieved, is required at all times as part of the activation of

the acoustic source. All operators must adhere to the following pre-clearance and ramp-up requirements:

- The operator must notify a designated PSO of the planned start of ramp-up as agreed upon with the lead PSO; the notification time should not be less than 60 minutes prior to the planned ramp-up in order to allow the PSOs time to monitor the exclusion and buffer zones for 30 minutes prior to the initiation of ramp-up (pre-clearance);
- Ramp-ups shall be scheduled so as to minimize the time spent with the source activated prior to reaching the designated run-in;
- One of the PSOs conducting pre-clearance observations must be notified again immediately prior to initiating ramp-up procedures and the operator must receive confirmation from the PSO to proceed;
- Ramp-up may not be initiated if any marine mammal is within the applicable exclusion or buffer zone. If a marine mammal is observed within the applicable exclusion zone or the buffer zone during the 30 minute pre-clearance period, ramp-up may not begin until the animal(s) has been observed exiting the zones or until an additional time period has elapsed with no further sightings (15 minutes for small odontocetes and pinnipeds, and 30 minutes for all mysticetes and all other odontocetes, including sperm whales, beaked whales, and large delphinids, such as killer whales);
- Ramp-up shall begin by activating a single airgun of the smallest volume in the array and shall continue in stages by doubling the number of active elements at the commencement of each stage, with each stage of approximately the same duration. Duration shall not be less than 20 minutes. The operator must provide information to the PSO documenting that appropriate procedures were followed;
- PSOs must monitor the exclusion and buffer zones during ramp-up, and ramp-up must cease and the source must be shut down upon detection of a marine mammal within the applicable exclusion zone. Once ramp-up has begun, detections of marine mammals within the buffer zone do not require shutdown, but such observation shall be communicated to the operator to prepare for the potential shutdown;
- Ramp-up may occur at times of poor visibility, including nighttime, if appropriate acoustic monitoring has occurred with no detections in the 30 minutes prior to beginning ramp-up. Acoustic source activation may only occur at times of poor visibility where operational planning cannot reasonably avoid such circumstances;

- If the acoustic source is shut down for brief periods (*i.e.*, less than 30 minutes) for reasons other than that described for shutdown (*e.g.*, mechanical difficulty), it may be activated again without ramp-up if PSOs have maintained constant visual and/or acoustic observation and no visual or acoustic detections of marine mammals have occurred within the applicable exclusion zone. For any longer shutdown, pre-clearance observation and ramp-up are required. For any shutdown at night or in periods of poor visibility (*e.g.*, BSS 4 or greater), ramp-up is required, but if the shutdown period was brief and constant observation was maintained, pre-clearance watch of 30 minutes is not required; and

- Testing of the acoustic source involving all elements requires ramp-up. Testing limited to individual source elements or strings does not require ramp-up but does require pre-clearance of 30 min.

#### *Shutdown*

The shutdown of an airgun array requires the immediate de-activation of all individual airgun elements of the array. Any PSO on duty will have the authority to delay the start of survey operations or to call for shutdown of the acoustic source if a marine mammal is detected within the applicable exclusion zone. The operator must also establish and maintain clear lines of communication directly between PSOs on duty and crew controlling the acoustic source to ensure that shutdown commands are conveyed swiftly while allowing PSOs to maintain watch. When both visual and acoustic PSOs are on duty, all detections will be immediately communicated to the remainder of the on-duty PSO team for potential verification of visual observations by the acoustic PSO or of acoustic detections by visual PSOs. When the airgun array is active (*i.e.*, anytime one or more airguns is active, including during ramp-up) and (1) a marine mammal appears within or enters the applicable exclusion zone and/or (2) a marine mammal (other than delphinids, see below) is detected acoustically and localized within the applicable exclusion zone, the acoustic source will be shut down. When shutdown is called for by a PSO, the acoustic source will be immediately deactivated and any dispute resolved only following deactivation. Additionally, shutdown will occur whenever PAM alone (without visual sighting), confirms presence of marine mammal(s) in the EZ. If the acoustic PSO cannot confirm presence within the EZ, visual PSOs

will be notified but shutdown is not required.

Following a shutdown, airgun activity would not resume until the marine mammal has cleared the 500-m EZ. The animal would be considered to have cleared the 500-m EZ if it is visually observed to have departed the 500-m EZ, or it has not been seen within the 500-m EZ for 15 min in the case of small odontocetes and pinnipeds, or 30 min in the case of mysticetes and large odontocetes, including sperm whales, beaked whales, killer whales, and Risso's dolphins.

The shutdown requirement can be waived for small dolphins if an individual is visually detected within the exclusion zone. As defined here, the small dolphin group is intended to encompass those members of the Family Delphinidae most likely to voluntarily approach the source vessel for purposes of interacting with the vessel and/or airgun array (*e.g.*, bow riding). This exception to the shutdown requirement applies solely to specific genera of small dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus* and *Lissodelphis*).

We include this small dolphin exception because shutdown requirements for small dolphins under all circumstances represent practicability concerns without likely commensurate benefits for the animals in question. Small dolphins are generally the most commonly observed marine mammals in the specific geographic region and would typically be the only marine mammals likely to intentionally approach the vessel. As described above, auditory injury is extremely unlikely to occur for mid-frequency cetaceans (*e.g.*, delphinids), as this group is relatively insensitive to sound produced at the predominant frequencies in an airgun pulse while also having a relatively high threshold for the onset of auditory injury (*i.e.*, permanent threshold shift).

A large body of anecdotal evidence indicates that small dolphins commonly approach vessels and/or towed arrays during active sound production for purposes of bow riding, with no apparent effect observed in those delphinoids (*e.g.*, Barkaszi *et al.*, 2012, 2018). The potential for increased shutdowns resulting from such a measure would require the *Langseth* to revisit the missed track line to reacquire data, resulting in an overall increase in the total sound energy input to the marine environment and an increase in the total duration over which the survey is active in a given area. Although other mid-frequency hearing specialists (*e.g.*, large delphinids) are no more likely to incur auditory injury than are small

dolphins, they are much less likely to approach vessels. Therefore, retaining a shutdown requirement for large delphinids would not have similar impacts in terms of either practicability for the applicant or corollary increase in sound energy output and time on the water. We do anticipate some benefit for a shutdown requirement for large delphinids in that it simplifies somewhat the total range of decision-making for PSOs and may preclude any potential for physiological effects other than to the auditory system as well as some more severe behavioral reactions for any such animals in close proximity to the source vessel.

Visual PSOs shall use best professional judgment in making the decision to call for a shutdown if there is uncertainty regarding identification (*i.e.*, whether the observed marine mammal(s) belongs to one of the delphinid genera for which shutdown is waived or one of the species with a larger exclusion zone).

Upon implementation of shutdown, the source may be reactivated after the marine mammal(s) has been observed exiting the applicable exclusion zone (*i.e.*, animal is not required to fully exit the buffer zone where applicable) or following 15 minutes for small odontocetes and pinnipeds, and 30 minutes for mysticetes and all other odontocetes, including sperm whales, beaked whales, killer whales, and Risso's dolphins, with no further observation of the marine mammal(s).

L-DEO must implement shutdown if a marine mammal species for which take was not authorized, or a species for which authorization was granted but the takes have been met, approaches the Level A or Level B harassment zones. L-DEO must also implement shutdown if any of the following are observed at any distance:

- Any large whale (defined as a sperm whale or any mysticete species) with a calf (defined as an animal less than two-thirds the body size of an adult observed to be in close association with an adult);
- An aggregation of six or more large whales; and/or
- A North Pacific right whale.

#### Vessel Strike Avoidance

1. Vessel operators and crews must maintain a vigilant watch for all protected species and slow down, stop their vessel, or alter course, as appropriate and regardless of vessel size, to avoid striking any protected species. A visual observer aboard the vessel must monitor a vessel strike avoidance zone around the vessel (distances stated below). Visual

observers monitoring the vessel strike avoidance zone may be third-party observers (*i.e.*, PSOs) or crew members, but crew members responsible for these duties must be provided sufficient training to (1) distinguish protected species from other phenomena and (2) broadly to identify a marine mammal as a right whale, other whale (defined in this context as sperm whales or baleen whales other than right whales), or other marine mammal.

2. Vessel speeds must also be reduced to 10 knots or less when mother/calf pairs, pods, or large assemblages of cetaceans are observed near a vessel.

3. All vessels must maintain a minimum separation distance of 500 m from right whales. If a whale is observed but cannot be confirmed as a species other than a right whale, the vessel operator must assume that it is a right whale and take appropriate action.

4. All vessels must maintain a minimum separation distance of 100 m from sperm whales and all other baleen whales.

5. All vessels must, to the maximum extent practicable, attempt to maintain a minimum separation distance of 50 m from all other protected species, with an understanding that at times this may not be possible (*e.g.*, for animals that approach the vessel).

6. When protected species are sighted while a vessel is underway, the vessel shall take action as necessary to avoid violating the relevant separation distance (*e.g.*, attempt to remain parallel to the animal's course, avoid excessive speed or abrupt changes in direction until the animal has left the area). If protected species are sighted within the relevant separation distance, the vessel must reduce speed and shift the engine to neutral, not engaging the engines until animals are clear of the area. This does not apply to any vessel towing gear or any vessel that is navigationally constrained.

7. These requirements do not apply in any case where compliance would create an imminent and serious threat to a person or vessel or to the extent that a vessel is restricted in its ability to maneuver and, because of the restriction, cannot comply.

We have carefully evaluated the suite of mitigation measures described here and considered a range of other measures in the context of ensuring that we prescribe the means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on the affected marine mammal species and stocks and their habitat. Based on our evaluation of the proposed measures, as well as other measures considered by NMFS described above, NMFS has preliminarily determined that the

mitigation measures provide the means effecting the least practicable impact on the affected species or stocks and their habitat, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance.

#### Proposed Monitoring and Reporting

In order to issue an IHA for an activity, Section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA states that NMFS must set forth requirements pertaining to the monitoring and reporting of such taking. The MMPA implementing regulations at 50 CFR 216.104 (a)(13) indicate that requests for authorizations must include the suggested means of accomplishing the necessary monitoring and reporting that will result in increased knowledge of the species and of the level of taking or impacts on populations of marine mammals that are expected to be present in the proposed action area. Effective reporting is critical both to compliance as well as ensuring that the most value is obtained from the required monitoring.

Monitoring and reporting requirements prescribed by NMFS should contribute to improved understanding of one or more of the following:

- Occurrence of marine mammal species or stocks in the area in which take is anticipated (*e.g.*, presence, abundance, distribution, density);
- Nature, scope, or context of likely marine mammal exposure to potential stressors/impacts (individual or cumulative, acute or chronic), through better understanding of: (1) Action or environment (*e.g.*, source characterization, propagation, ambient noise); (2) affected species (*e.g.*, life history, dive patterns); (3) co-occurrence of marine mammal species with the action; or (4) biological or behavioral context of exposure (*e.g.*, age, calving or feeding areas);
- Individual marine mammal responses (behavioral or physiological) to acoustic stressors (acute, chronic, or cumulative), other stressors, or cumulative impacts from multiple stressors;
- How anticipated responses to stressors impact either: (1) Long-term fitness and survival of individual marine mammals; or (2) populations, species, or stocks;
- Effects on marine mammal habitat (*e.g.*, marine mammal prey species, acoustic habitat, or other important physical components of marine mammal habitat); and
- Mitigation and monitoring effectiveness.

### Vessel-Based Visual Monitoring

As described above, PSO observations would take place during daytime airgun operations. During seismic operations, at least five visual PSOs would be based aboard the *Langseth*. Two visual PSOs would be on duty at all time during daytime hours. Monitoring shall be conducted in accordance with the following requirements:

- The operator shall provide PSOs with bigeye binoculars (e.g., 25 x 150; 2.7 view angle; individual ocular focus; height control) of appropriate quality (*i.e.*, Fujinon or equivalent) solely for PSO use. These shall be pedestal-mounted on the deck at the most appropriate vantage point that provides for optimal sea surface observation, PSO safety, and safe operation of the vessel; and

• The operator will work with the selected third-party observer provider to ensure PSOs have all equipment (including backup equipment) needed to adequately perform necessary tasks, including accurate determination of distance and bearing to observed marine mammals. PSOs must have the following requirements and qualifications:

- PSOs shall be independent, dedicated, trained visual and acoustic PSOs and must be employed by a third-party observer provider;
- PSOs shall have no tasks other than to conduct observational effort (visual or acoustic), collect data, and communicate with and instruct relevant vessel crew with regard to the presence of protected species and mitigation requirements (including brief alerts regarding maritime hazards);

• PSOs shall have successfully completed an approved PSO training course appropriate for their designated task (visual or acoustic). Acoustic PSOs are required to complete specialized training for operating PAM systems and are encouraged to have familiarity with the vessel with which they will be working;

• PSOs can act as acoustic or visual observers (but not at the same time) as long as they demonstrate that their training and experience are sufficient to perform the task at hand;

• NMFS must review and approve PSO resumes accompanied by a relevant training course information packet that includes the name and qualifications (*i.e.*, experience, training completed, or educational background) of the instructor(s), the course outline or syllabus, and course reference material as well as a document stating successful completion of the course;

• NMFS shall have one week to approve PSOs from the time that the

necessary information is submitted, after which PSOs meeting the minimum requirements shall automatically be considered approved;

- PSOs must successfully complete relevant training, including completion of all required coursework and passing (80 percent or greater) a written and/or oral examination developed for the training program;

• PSOs must have successfully attained a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university with a major in one of the natural sciences, a minimum of 30 semester hours or equivalent in the biological sciences, and at least one undergraduate course in math or statistics; and

- The educational requirements may be waived if the PSO has acquired the relevant skills through alternate experience. Requests for such a waiver shall be submitted to NMFS and must include written justification. Requests shall be granted or denied (with justification) by NMFS within one week of receipt of submitted information. Alternate experience that may be considered includes, but is not limited to (1) secondary education and/or experience comparable to PSO duties; (2) previous work experience conducting academic, commercial, or government-sponsored protected species surveys; or (3) previous work experience as a PSO; the PSO should demonstrate good standing and consistently good performance of PSO duties.

For data collection purposes, PSOs shall use standardized data collection forms, whether hard copy or electronic. PSOs shall record detailed information about any implementation of mitigation requirements, including the distance of animals to the acoustic source and description of specific actions that ensued, the behavior of the animal(s), any observed changes in behavior before and after implementation of mitigation, and if shutdown was implemented, the length of time before any subsequent ramp-up of the acoustic source. If required mitigation was not implemented, PSOs should record a description of the circumstances. At a minimum, the following information must be recorded:

- Vessel names (source vessel and other vessels associated with survey) and call signs;
- PSO names and affiliations;
- Dates of departures and returns to port with port name;
- Date and participants of PSO briefings;
- Dates and times (Greenwich Mean Time) of survey effort and times corresponding with PSO effort;

• Vessel location (latitude/longitude) when survey effort began and ended and vessel location at beginning and end of visual PSO duty shifts;

- Vessel heading and speed at beginning and end of visual PSO duty shifts and upon any line change;

• Environmental conditions while on visual survey (at beginning and end of PSO shift and whenever conditions changed significantly), including BSS and any other relevant weather conditions including cloud cover, fog, sun glare, and overall visibility to the horizon;

- Factors that may have contributed to impaired observations during each PSO shift change or as needed as environmental conditions changed (*e.g.*, vessel traffic, equipment malfunctions); and

• Survey activity information, such as acoustic source power output while in operation, number and volume of airguns operating in the array, tow depth of the array, and any other notes of significance (*i.e.*, pre-clearance, ramp-up, shutdown, testing, shooting, ramp-up completion, end of operations, streamers, etc.).

The following information should be recorded upon visual observation of any protected species:

- Watch status (sighting made by PSO on/off effort, opportunistic, crew, alternate vessel/platform);
  - PSO who sighted the animal;
  - Time of sighting;
  - Vessel location at time of sighting;
  - Water depth;
  - Direction of vessel's travel (compass direction);
  - Direction of animal's travel relative to the vessel;
    - Pace of the animal;
    - Estimated distance to the animal and its heading relative to vessel at initial sighting;
  - Identification of the animal (*e.g.*, genus/species, lowest possible taxonomic level, or unidentified) and the composition of the group if there is a mix of species;
  - Estimated number of animals (high/low/best);
  - Estimated number of animals by cohort (adults, yearlings, juveniles, calves, group composition, etc.);
  - Description (as many distinguishing features as possible of each individual seen, including length, shape, color, pattern, scars or markings, shape and size of dorsal fin, shape of head, and blow characteristics);
  - Detailed behavior observations (*e.g.*, number of blows/breaths, number of surfaces, breaching, spyhopping, diving, feeding, traveling; as explicit and detailed as possible; note any observed changes in behavior);

- Animal's closest point of approach (CPA) and/or closest distance from any element of the acoustic source;
- Platform activity at time of sighting (e.g., deploying, recovering, testing, shooting, data acquisition, other); and
- Description of any actions implemented in response to the sighting (e.g., delays, shutdown, ramp-up) and time and location of the action.

If a marine mammal is detected while using the PAM system, the following information should be recorded:

- An acoustic encounter identification number, and whether the detection was linked with a visual sighting;
- Date and time when first and last heard;
- Types and nature of sounds heard (e.g., clicks, whistles, creaks, burst pulses, continuous, sporadic, strength of signal); and
- Any additional information recorded such as water depth of the hydrophone array, bearing of the animal to the vessel (if determinable), species or taxonomic group (if determinable), spectrogram screenshot, and any other notable information.

#### *Reporting*

A report would be submitted to NMFS within 90 days after the end of the cruise. The report would describe the operations that were conducted and sightings of marine mammals near the operations. The report would provide full documentation of methods, results, and interpretation pertaining to all monitoring. The 90-day report would summarize the dates and locations of seismic operations, and all marine mammal sightings (dates, times, locations, activities, associated seismic survey activities).

The draft report shall also include geo-referenced time-stamped vessel tracklines for all time periods during which airguns were operating. Tracklines should include points recording any change in airgun status (e.g., when the airguns began operating, when they were turned off, or when they changed from full array to single gun or vice versa). GIS files shall be provided in ESRI shapefile format and include the UTC date and time, latitude in decimal degrees, and longitude in decimal degrees. All coordinates shall be referenced to the WGS84 geographic coordinate system. In addition to the report, all raw observational data shall be made available to NMFS. The report must summarize the data collected as described above and in the IHA. A final report must be submitted within 30 days following resolution of any comments on the draft report.

#### *Reporting Injured or Dead Marine Mammals*

*Discovery of injured or dead marine mammals*—In the event that personnel involved in survey activities covered by the authorization discover an injured or dead marine mammal, the L-DEO shall report the incident to the Office of Protected Resources (OPR), NMFS and to the NMFS Alaska Regional Stranding Coordinator as soon as feasible. The report must include the following information:

- Time, date, and location (latitude/longitude) of the first discovery (and updated location information if known and applicable);
- Species identification (if known) or description of the animal(s) involved;
  - Condition of the animal(s) (including carcass condition if the animal is dead);
  - Observed behaviors of the animal(s), if alive;
  - If available, photographs or video footage of the animal(s); and
  - General circumstances under which the animal was discovered.

*Vessel strike*—In the event of a ship strike of a marine mammal by any vessel involved in the activities covered by the authorization, L-DEO shall report the incident to OPR, NMFS and to the NMFS Alaska Regional Stranding Coordinator as soon as feasible. The report must include the following information:

- Time, date, and location (latitude/longitude) of the incident;
- Vessel's speed during and leading up to the incident;
- Vessel's course/heading and what operations were being conducted (if applicable);
- Status of all sound sources in use;
- Description of avoidance measures requirements that were in place at the time of the strike and what additional measure were taken, if any, to avoid strike;
- Environmental conditions (e.g., wind speed and direction, Beaufort sea state, cloud cover, visibility) immediately preceding the strike;
- Species identification (if known) or description of the animal(s) involved;
- Estimated size and length of the animal that was struck;
- Description of the behavior of the animal immediately preceding and following the strike;
- If available, description of the presence and behavior of any other marine mammals present immediately preceding the strike;
- Estimated fate of the animal (e.g., dead, injured but alive, injured and moving, blood or tissue observed in the

water, status unknown, disappeared); and

- To the extent practicable, photographs or video footage of the animal(s).

#### *Actions To Minimize Additional Harm to Live-Stranded (or Milling) Marine Mammals*

In the event of a live stranding (or near-shore atypical milling) event within 50 km of the survey operations, where the NMFS stranding network is engaged in herding or other interventions to return animals to the water, the Director of OPR, NMFS (or designee) will advise L-DEO of the need to implement shutdown procedures for all active acoustic sources operating within 50 km of the stranding. Shutdown procedures for live stranding or milling marine mammals include the following: If at any time, the marine mammal or the marine mammal(s) die or are euthanized, or if herding/intervention efforts are stopped, the Director of OPR, NMFS (or designee) will advise the IHA-holder that the shutdown around the animals' location is no longer needed. Otherwise, shutdown procedures will remain in effect until the Director of OPR, NMFS (or designee) determines and advises L-DEO that all live animals involved have left the area (either of their own volition or following an intervention).

If further observations of the marine mammals indicate the potential for re-stranding, additional coordination with the IHA-holder will be required to determine what measures are necessary to minimize that likelihood (e.g., extending the shutdown or moving operations farther away) and to implement those measures as appropriate.

*Additional Information Requests*—If NMFS determines that the circumstances of any marine mammal stranding found in the vicinity of the activity suggest investigation of the association with survey activities is warranted, and an investigation into the stranding is being pursued, NMFS will submit a written request to L-DEO indicating that the following initial available information must be provided as soon as possible, but no later than 7 business days after the request for information:

- Status of all sound source use in the 48 hours preceding the estimated time of stranding and within 50 km of the discovery/notification of the stranding by NMFS; and
- If available, description of the behavior of any marine mammal(s) observed preceding (i.e., within 48

hours and 50 km) and immediately after the discovery of the stranding.

In the event that the investigation is still inconclusive, the investigation of the association of the survey activities is still warranted, and the investigation is still being pursued, NMFS may provide additional information requests, in writing, regarding the nature and location of survey operations prior to the time period above.

#### Negligible Impact Analysis and Determination

NMFS has defined negligible impact 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 (50 CFR 216.103). A negligible impact finding is based on the lack of likely adverse effects on annual rates of recruitment or survival (*i.e.*, population-level effects). An estimate of the number of takes alone is not enough information on which to base an impact determination. In addition to considering estimates of the number of marine mammals that might be “taken” through harassment, NMFS considers other factors, such as the likely nature of any responses (*e.g.*, intensity, duration), the context of any responses (*e.g.*, critical reproductive time or location, migration), as well as effects on habitat, and the likely effectiveness of the mitigation. We also assess the number, intensity, and context of estimated takes by evaluating this information relative to population status. Consistent with the 1989 preamble for NMFS’s implementing regulations (54 FR 40338; September 29, 1989), the impacts from other past and ongoing anthropogenic activities are incorporated into this analysis via their impacts on the environmental baseline (*e.g.*, as reflected in the regulatory status of the species, population size and growth rate where known, ongoing sources of human-caused mortality, or ambient noise levels).

To avoid repetition, our analysis applies to all species listed in Tables 1, given that NMFS expects the anticipated effects of the planned geophysical survey to be similar in nature. Where there are meaningful differences between species or stocks, or groups of species, in anticipated individual responses to activities, impact of expected take on the population due to differences in population status, or impacts on habitat, NMFS has identified species-specific factors to inform the analysis.

NMFS does not anticipate that serious injury or mortality would occur as a result of L-DEO’s planned survey, even in the absence of mitigation, and none would be authorized. Similarly, non-auditory physical effects, stranding, and vessel strike are not expected to occur.

We are proposing to authorize a limited number of instances of Level A harassment of seven species (low- and high-frequency cetacean hearing groups only) and Level B harassment only of the remaining marine mammal species. However, we believe that any PTS incurred in marine mammals as a result of the planned activity would be in the form of only a small degree of PTS, not total deafness, because of the constant movement of both the R/V *Langseth* and of the marine mammals in the project areas, as well as the fact that the vessel is not expected to remain in any one area in which individual marine mammals would be expected to concentrate for an extended period of time. Since the duration of exposure to loud sounds will be relatively short it would be unlikely to affect the fitness of any individuals. Also, as described above, we expect that marine mammals would likely move away from a sound source that represents an aversive stimulus, especially at levels that would be expected to result in PTS, given sufficient notice of the R/V *Langseth*’s approach due to the vessel’s relatively low speed when conducting seismic surveys. We expect that the majority of takes would be in the form of short-term Level B behavioral harassment in the form of temporary avoidance of the area or decreased foraging (if such activity were occurring), reactions that are considered to be of low severity and with no lasting biological consequences (*e.g.*, Southall *et al.*, 2007, Ellison *et al.*, 2012).

Marine mammal habitat may be impacted by elevated sound levels, but these impacts would be temporary. Prey species are mobile and are broadly distributed throughout the project areas; therefore, marine mammals that may be temporarily displaced during survey activities are expected to be able to resume foraging once they have moved away from areas with disturbing levels of underwater noise. Because of the relatively short duration (16 days) and temporary nature of the disturbance, the availability of similar habitat and resources in the surrounding area, the impacts to marine mammals and the food sources that they utilize are not expected to cause significant or long-term consequences for individual marine mammals or their populations.

The tracklines of this survey either traverse or are proximal to critical

habitat areas for the Steller sea lion and to a feeding BIA for humpback whales. However, only a portion of seismic survey days would actually occur in or near these areas. As described previously, L-DEO’s planned tracklines do not extend within 3 nmi of any island, and L-DEO has agreed to reduce the active array by half of the elements, also reducing the total array volume by half, over the 10 percent of planned tracklines that are closest to shore. Finally, L-DEO has agreed to maintain a standoff distance around specific Steller sea lion haul-outs and rookeries such that the modeled Level B harassment zone would not overlap a 3,000-foot (0.9-km) buffer around those areas. Impacts to Steller sea lions within these areas, and throughout the survey area, are expected to be limited to short-term behavioral disturbance, with no lasting biological consequences.

Yazvenko *et al.* (2007b) reported no apparent changes in the frequency of feeding activity in Western gray whales exposed to airgun sounds in their feeding grounds near Sakhalin Island. Goldbogen *et al.* (2013) found blue whales feeding on highly concentrated prey in shallow depths (such as the conditions expected within humpback feeding BIAs) were less likely to respond and cease foraging than whales feeding on deep, dispersed prey when exposed to simulated sonar sources, suggesting that the benefits of feeding for humpbacks foraging on high-density prey may outweigh perceived harm from the acoustic stimulus, such as the seismic survey (Southall *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, L-DEO will shut down the airgun array upon observation of an aggregation of six or more large whales, which would reduce impacts to cooperatively foraging animals. For all habitats, no physical impacts to habitat are anticipated from seismic activities. While SPLs of sufficient strength have been known to cause injury to fish and fish and invertebrate mortality, in feeding habitats, the most likely impact to prey species from survey activities would be temporary avoidance of the affected area and any injury or mortality of prey species would be localized around the survey and not of a degree that would adversely impact marine mammal foraging. The duration of fish avoidance of a given area after survey effort stops is unknown, but a rapid return to normal recruitment, distribution and behavior is expected. Given the short operational seismic time near or traversing important habitat areas, as well as the ability of cetaceans and prey species to move away from acoustic sources, NMFS expects that

there would be, at worst, minimal impacts to animals and habitat within these areas.

#### Negligible Impact Conclusions

The proposed survey would be of short duration (16 days of seismic operations), and the acoustic “footprint” of the proposed survey would be small relative to the ranges of the marine mammals that would potentially be affected. Sound levels would increase in the marine environment in a relatively small area surrounding the vessel compared to the range of the marine mammals within the proposed survey area. Short term exposures to survey operations are not likely to significantly disrupt marine mammal behavior, and the potential for longer-term avoidance of important areas is limited. The survey vessel would pass Steller sea lion critical habitat only briefly, and would operate at half volume during the ten percent of tracklines closest to the islands.

The proposed mitigation measures are expected to reduce the number and/or severity of takes by allowing for detection of marine mammals in the vicinity of the vessel by visual and acoustic observers, and by minimizing the severity of any potential exposures via shutdowns of the airgun array. Based on previous monitoring reports for substantially similar activities that have been previously authorized by NMFS, we expect that the proposed mitigation will be effective in preventing, at least to some extent, potential PTS in marine mammals that may otherwise occur in the absence of the proposed mitigation (although all authorized PTS has been accounted for in this analysis).

NMFS concludes that exposures to marine mammal species and stocks due to L-DEO's proposed survey would result in only short-term (temporary and short in duration) effects to individuals exposed, over relatively small areas of the affected animals' ranges. Animals may temporarily avoid the immediate area, but are not expected to permanently abandon the area. Major shifts in habitat use, distribution, or foraging success are not expected. NMFS does not anticipate the proposed take estimates to impact annual rates of recruitment or survival.

In summary and as described above, the following factors primarily support our preliminary determination that the impacts resulting from this activity are not expected to adversely affect the species or stock through effects on annual rates of recruitment or survival:

- No serious injury or mortality is anticipated or proposed to be authorized;
  - The proposed activity is temporary and of relatively short duration (16 days);
  - The anticipated impacts of the proposed activity on marine mammals would primarily be temporary behavioral changes due to avoidance of the area around the survey vessel;
  - The number of instances of potential PTS that may occur are expected to be very small in number. Instances of potential PTS that are incurred in marine mammals are expected to be of a low level, due to constant movement of the vessel and of the marine mammals in the area, and the nature of the survey design (not concentrated in areas of high marine mammal concentration);
  - The availability of alternate areas of similar habitat value for marine mammals to temporarily vacate the survey area during the proposed survey to avoid exposure to sounds from the activity;
  - The potential adverse effects on fish or invertebrate species that serve as prey species for marine mammals from the proposed survey would be temporary and spatially limited, and impacts to marine mammal foraging would be minimal; and
  - The proposed mitigation measures, including visual and acoustic monitoring, shutdowns, and use of the reduced array in certain areas adjacent to Steller sea lion critical habitat are expected to minimize potential impacts to marine mammals (both amount and severity).
- Based on the analysis contained herein of the likely effects of the specified activity on marine mammals and their habitat, and taking into consideration the implementation of the proposed mitigation and monitoring measures, NMFS preliminarily finds that the total marine mammal take from the proposed activity will have a negligible impact on all affected marine mammal species or stocks.

#### Small Numbers

As noted above, only small numbers of incidental take may be authorized under Sections 101(a)(5)(A) and (D) of the MMPA for specified activities other than military readiness activities. The MMPA does not define small numbers and so, in practice, where estimated numbers are available, NMFS compares the number of individuals taken to the most appropriate estimation of abundance of the relevant species or stock in our determination of whether an authorization is limited to small

numbers of marine mammals. When the predicted number of individuals to be taken is fewer than one-third of the species or stock abundance, the take is considered to be of small numbers. Additionally, other qualitative factors may be considered in the analysis, such as the temporal or spatial scale of the activities.

There are several stocks for which the estimated instances of take appear high when compared to the stock abundance (Table 6), or for which there is no currently accepted stock abundance estimate. These include the humpback whale, fin whale, minke whale, sperm whale, three species of beaked whale, and the offshore stock of killer whales. However, when other qualitative factors are used to inform an assessment of the likely number of individual marine mammals taken, the resulting numbers are appropriately considered small. We discuss these in further detail below.

For all other stocks (aside from those referenced above and discussed below), the proposed take is less than one-third of the best available stock abundance (recognizing that some of those takes may be repeats of the same individual, thus rendering the actual percentage even lower).

Existing stock abundance estimates for humpback whales, based on 2006 surveys, are 10,103 animals for the CNP stock and 1,107 animals for the WNP stock. If all takes are assumed to accrue to the WNP stock, the resulting percentage would not be a small number. Here, we refer to additional pieces of information that demonstrate the proposed taking to be of no greater than small numbers. First, Wade (2017) provides a more recent estimate of 14,693 whales for the summer (feeding area) abundance in the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea, which includes the survey area. The total estimated take of humpback whale (2,719 take incidents) would be 18.5 percent of this estimated summer abundance, *i.e.*, less than NMFS' small numbers threshold of one-third of the best available abundance estimate. Second, we expect that only 2.1 percent of whales encountered in this area would be from the WNP DPS. If we consider the WNP DPS to be a reasonable approximation of the historic WNP stock designation, then approximately 57 takes should be expected to accrue to the stock (or approximately 5 percent of the 2006 abundance estimate for the WNP stock). This information supports a preliminary determination that the take proposed for authorization for humpback whales would be of no greater than small numbers, for any stock.

The stock abundance estimates for the fin, minke, beaked, and sperm whale stocks that occur in the survey area are unknown, according to the latest SARs. Therefore, we reviewed other scientific information in making our small numbers determinations for these whales. As noted previously, partial abundance estimates of 1,233 and 2,020 minke whales are available for shelf and nearshore waters between the Kenai Peninsula and Amchitka Pass and for the eastern Bering Sea shelf, respectively. For the minke whale, these partial abundance estimates alone are sufficient to demonstrate that the proposed take number of 32 is of small numbers. The same surveys produced partial abundance estimates of 1,652 and 1,061 fin whales, for the same areas, respectively. For the fin whale, we must turn to the only available region-wide abundance estimate. Ohsumi and Wada (1974) provided an estimated North Pacific abundance of 13,620–18,680 whales. Using the lower bound produces a proportion of 15.8 percent.

As noted previously, Kato and Miyashita (1998) produced an abundance estimate of 102,112 sperm whales in the western North Pacific. However, this estimate is believed to be positively biased. We therefore refer to Barlow and Taylor (2005)'s estimate of 26,300 sperm whales in the northeast temperate Pacific to demonstrate that the proposed take number of 159 is a small number. There is no abundance information available for any Alaskan stock of beaked whale. However, the take numbers are sufficiently small (ranging from 27–117) that can safely assume that they are small relative to any reasonable assumption of likely population abundance for these stocks.

For the offshore stock of killer whale, it would be unreasonable to assume that all takes would accrue to this stock (which would result in the take of 56.5 percent of the population). During surveys from the Kenai Fjords to Amchitka Pass in the central Aleutian Islands, 59 groups totaling 1,038 individual killer whales were seen, including 39 (66 percent) residents, 14 (24 percent) transients, 2 (3 percent) offshore, and 4 (7 percent) unknown (Wade et al., 2003). Based on this information, we assume it relatively unlikely that encountered killer whales will be of the offshore stock, and that take of offshore killer whales, if any, would be of small numbers.

Based on the analysis contained herein of the proposed activity (including the proposed mitigation and monitoring measures) and the anticipated take of marine mammals, NMFS preliminarily finds that small

numbers of marine mammals will be taken relative to the population size of the affected species or stocks.

#### **Unmitigable Adverse Impact Analysis and Determination**

There is some sealing by indigenous groups in the proposed survey area in the Aleutian Islands. However, given the temporary nature of the proposed activities and the fact that all operations would occur more than 3 nmi from shore, the proposed activity would not be expected to have any impact on the availability of the species or stocks for subsistence users. L-DEO conducted outreach to the Aleut Marine Mammal Commission and to the Alaska Sea Otter and Steller Sea Lion Commission to notify subsistence hunters of the planned survey, to identify the measures that would be taken to minimize any effects on the availability of marine mammals for subsistence uses, and to provide an opportunity for comment on these measures. L-DEO received confirmation from the Aleut Marine Mammal Commissioners that there were no concerns regarding the potential effects of the planned survey on the potential availability of marine mammals for subsistence uses. NMFS is unaware of any other subsistence uses of the affected marine mammal stocks or species that could be implicated by this action. Therefore, NMFS has preliminarily determined that the total taking of affected species or stocks would not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of such species or stocks for taking for subsistence purposes.

#### **Endangered Species Act (ESA)**

Section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA: 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*) requires that each Federal agency insure that any action it authorizes, funds, or carries out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered or threatened species or result in the destruction or adverse modification of designated critical habitat. To ensure ESA compliance for the issuance of IHAs, NMFS consults internally whenever we propose to authorize take for endangered or threatened species.

NMFS is proposing to authorize take of blue whales, fin whales, sei whales, sperm whales, WNP and Mexico DPS humpback whales, western DPS Steller sea lions, and WNP gray whales, which are listed under the ESA. The NMFS Office of Protected Resources (OPR) Permits and Conservation Division has requested initiation of Section 7 consultation with the NMFS OPR ESA Interagency Cooperation Division for the

issuance of this IHA. NMFS will conclude the ESA consultation prior to reaching a determination regarding the proposed issuance of the authorization.

#### **Proposed Authorization**

As a result of these preliminary determinations, NMFS proposes to issue an IHA to L-DEO for conducting a marine geophysical survey in the Aleutian Islands beginning in September 2020, provided the previously mentioned mitigation, monitoring, and reporting requirements are incorporated. A draft of the proposed IHA can be found at [www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/incidental-take-authorizations-under-marine-mammal-protection-act](http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/permit/incidental-take-authorizations-under-marine-mammal-protection-act).

#### **Request for Public Comments**

We request comment on our analyses, the proposed authorization, and any other aspect of this notice of Proposed IHA for the proposed geophysical survey. We also request at this time comment on the potential Renewal of this proposed IHA as described in the paragraph below. Please include with your comments any supporting data or literature citations to help inform decisions on the request for this IHA or a subsequent Renewal IHA.

On a case-by-case basis, NMFS may issue a one-time, one-year Renewal IHA following notice to the public providing an additional 15 days for public comments when (1) up to another year of identical, or nearly identical, activities as described in the Specified Activities section of this notice is planned or (2) the activities as described in the Specified Activities section of this notice would not be completed by the time the IHA expires and a Renewal would allow for completion of the activities beyond that described in the Dates and Duration section of this notice, provided all of the following conditions are met:

- A request for renewal is received no later than 60 days prior to the needed Renewal IHA effective date (recognizing that the Renewal IHA expiration date cannot extend beyond one year from expiration of the initial IHA);

• The request for renewal must include the following:

- (1) An explanation that the activities to be conducted under the requested Renewal IHA are identical to the activities analyzed under the initial IHA, are a subset of the activities, or include changes so minor (*e.g.*, reduction in pile size) that the changes do not affect the previous analyses, mitigation and monitoring requirements, or take estimates (with

the exception of reducing the type or amount of take); and

(2) A preliminary monitoring report showing the results of the required monitoring to date and an explanation showing that the monitoring results do not indicate impacts of a scale or nature not previously analyzed or authorized.

- Upon review of the request for Renewal, the status of the affected species or stocks, and any other pertinent information, NMFS determines that there are no more than minor changes in the activities, the mitigation and monitoring measures will remain the same and appropriate, and the findings in the initial IHA remain valid.

Dated: July 22, 2020.

**Donna S. Wieting,**

Director, Office of Protected Resources,  
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

[Docket No.: ED-2020-SCC-0121]

### Agency Information Collection Activities; Submission to the Office of Management and Budget for Review and Approval; Comment Request; International Study of Adult Skills and Learning (ISASL) [Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Cycle II]

**AGENCY:** National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Department of Education (ED).

**ACTION:** Notice.

**SUMMARY:** In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, ED is proposing change to an existing information collection request.

**DATES:** Interested persons are invited to submit comments on or before August 27, 2020.

**ADDRESSES:** Written comments and recommendations for proposed information collection requests should be sent within 30 days of publication of this notice to [www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAMain](http://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAMain). Find this particular information collection request by selecting “Department of Education” under “Currently Under Review,” then check “Only Show ICR for Public Comment” checkbox.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** For specific questions related to collection activities, please call Carrie Clarady, 202-245-6347 or send an email to [NCES.Information.Collections@ed.gov](mailto:NCES.Information.Collections@ed.gov).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The Department of Education (ED), in

accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA) (44 U.S.C. 3506(c)(2)(A)), provides the general public and Federal agencies with an opportunity to comment on proposed, revised, and continuing collections of information. This helps the Department assess the impact of its information collection requirements and minimize the public’s reporting burden. It also helps the public understand the Department’s information collection requirements and provide the requested data in the desired format. ED is soliciting comments on the proposed information collection request (ICR) that is described below. The Department of Education is especially interested in public comment addressing the following issues: (1) Is this collection necessary to the proper functions of the Department; (2) will this information be processed and used in a timely manner; (3) is the estimate of burden accurate; (4) how might the Department enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected; and (5) how might the Department minimize the burden of this collection on the respondents, including through the use of information technology. Please note that written comments received in response to this notice will be considered public records.

*Title of Collection:* International Study of Adult Skills and Learning (ISASL) [Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Cycle II].

*OMB Control Number:* 1850-0870.

*Type of Review:* Change to an existing information collection.

*Respondents/Affected Public:* Individuals or households.

*Total Estimated Number of Annual Responses:* 5,611.

*Total Estimated Number of Annual Burden Hours:* 1,258.

*Abstract:* The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is a cyclical, large-scale study of adult skills and life experiences focusing on education and employment. PIAAC is an international study designed to assess adults in different countries over a broad range of abilities, from simple reading to complex problem-solving skills, and to collect information on individuals’ skill use and background. PIAAC is coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and developed by participating countries with the support of the OECD. In the United States, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), within the U.S. Department of Education (ED) conducts PIAAC. The U.S. participated in the PIAAC Main

Study data collection in 2012 and conducted national supplement data collections in 2014 and 2017. All three of these collections are part of PIAAC Cycle I. A new PIAAC cycle is to be conducted every 10 years, and PIAAC Cycle II Main Study data collection will be conducted from August 2021 through March 2022. In preparation for the main study collection, PIAAC Cycle II will begin with a Field Test in 2020, in which 34 countries are expected to participate with the primary goal of evaluating newly developed assessment and questionnaire items and to test the PIAAC 2022 planned operations. PIAAC 2022 defines four core competency domains of adult cognitive skills that are seen as key to facilitating the social and economic participation of adults in advanced economies: (1) Literacy, (2) numeracy, (3) reading and numeracy components, and (4) adaptive problem solving. The U.S. will administer all four domains of the PIAAC 2022 assessment to a nationally representative sample of adults, along with a background questionnaire with questions about their education background, work history, the skills they use on the job and at home, their civic engagement, and sense of their health and well-being. The results are used to compare the skills capacities of the workforce-aged adults in participating countries, and to learn more about relationships between educational background, employment, and other outcomes. In addition, in PIAAC 2022, a set of financial literacy questions will be included in the background questionnaire. As in Cycle I, a user-friendly name for PIAAC Cycle II was created—the International Study of Adult Skills and Learning (ISASL)—to represent the program to the public, and will be used on all public-facing materials and reports. As this international program is well-known within the federal and education research communities, we continue to use “PIAAC” in all internal and OMB clearance materials and communications, and use the “PIAAC” name throughout this submission; however all recruitment and communication materials refer to the study as ISASL. The request to conduct the PIAAC Cycle II Field Test in April–June 2020 was approved by OMB in December 2019 (OMB# 1850-0870 v.7-8). This request updates Part A of the package to reflect a one-year delay in all data collections, due to the global coronavirus pandemic.