Public Comment

Public comment letters will be accepted and should be submitted electronically to *https://meetings.npfmc.org/Meeting/Details/3124.*

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: April 8, 2026.

Rey Israel Marquez,

Acting Deputy Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

[RTID 0648–XF602]

Takes of Marine Mammals Incidental to Specified Activities; Taking Marine Mammals Incidental to Point Blue Conservation Science's Seabird Research Activities on the South Farallon Islands, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, California, as Well as at Partner Sites on Año Nuevo Island and the Point Reyes Headlands

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 Point Blue Conservation Science (Point Blue) for authorization to take marine mammals incidental to seabird research activities on the South Farallon Islands, Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, California, as well as at partner sites on Año Nuevo Island (ANI) and the Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS). 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 authorization and agency responses will be summarized in the final notice of our decision.

DATES: Comments and information must be received no later than May 11, 2026.

ADDRESSES: Comments should be addressed to the Permits and Conservation Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service. Written comments should be submitted via email to *ITP.Cockrell@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, 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/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.

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: *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/incidental-take-authorizations-research-and-other-activities*. In case of problems accessing these documents, please call the contact listed below.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Craig Cockrell, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, (301) 427–8401.

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 proposed or, if the taking is limited to harassment, a notice of a proposed IHA is 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 IHA) with respect to potential impacts on the human environment.

This action is consistent with categories of activities identified in Categorical Exclusion B4 (IHAs with no anticipated serious injury or mortality) of the Companion Manual for NOA 216–6A, which do not individually or cumulatively have the potential for significant impacts on the quality of the human environment and for which we have not identified any extraordinary circumstances that would preclude this categorical exclusion. Accordingly, NMFS has preliminarily determined that the issuance of the proposed IHA qualifies to be categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

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 February 17, 2026, NMFS received a request from Point Blue for an IHA to take marine mammals incidental to seabird research activities on the Southeast Farallon Islands and West End Island (collectively called ''SEFI''), California, as well as at partner sites on ANI and PRNS. The application was deemed adequate and complete on April 7, 2026. Point Blue's request is for take of a small number of five species of marine mammals (consisting of six stocks) by Level B harassment only. Neither Point Blue nor NMFS expects serious injury or mortality to result from this activity and, therefore, an IHA is appropriate.

This proposed IHA would cover 1 year of a larger project for which Point Blue obtained prior incidental take authorizations (ITAs) and intends to request take authorization for

subsequent continuation of the ongoing project. The larger project involves year-round monitoring of seabirds and management activities at the locations described above. Activities are ongoing and have been for over 30 years. Point Blue has previously complied with all the requirements (*e.g.,* mitigation, monitoring, and reporting) of the previous ITAs and information regarding their monitoring results may be found in the Estimated Take section.

Description of Proposed Activity

Overview

Point Blue, along with their research partners Oikonos Ecosystem Knowledge and PRNS have been conducting seabird research in central California for over 30 years. This research is conducted under cooperative agreements with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in consultation with the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary. Point Blue conducts research activities on SEFI, ANI, and PRNS. Research activities include monitoring and censusing seabird colonies, observing seabird nesting habitat, restoring nesting burrows, and resupplying a field station at SEFI. Research is conducted throughout the year at each of the research sites. Researchers accessing and conducting research activities on the sites may occasionally cause behavioral disturbance (Level B harassment) of five pinniped species (six stocks). Point Blue expects that the disturbance to pinnipeds from the research activities will be limited to Level B harassment.

Dates and Duration

Point Blue's research is conducted throughout the year. At SEFI, most intertidal areas of the island (*i.e.,* areas where marine mammals are present) are rarely visited during seabird research activities. On SEFI, most visits to locations where pinnipeds are hauled out are typically brief (approximately 15 minutes in duration). Boat landings to re-supply the field station, which may occur at either East or North Landing on SEFI, typically last 1 to 3 hours and are conducted once every 2 weeks.

On ANI, Point Blue has proposed a scale back of activities compared to the description in other ITAs that were previously issued. Research is now typically conducted during three to four brief visits between April and September, annually. An exception would be for a component of the seabird research which involves nesting habitat restoration and monitoring, which would require more sporadic visits from September through November. This is between the seabird breeding season and the elephant seal pupping season. Similar to SEFI, the intertidal areas on the island, which are more dominated by pinnipeds, are not ever visited for work on ANI. The only exception to this would be the landing beach and north of the beach to the island's terrace where a small number of seabird nest boxes are located. Landing activities and visits to the nest boxes are expected to be brief (approximately 15 minutes).

At PRNS, research activities occur year-round, with a stronger emphasis during the seabird nesting season. Additional intermittent visits for the rest of the year are also expected to occur. Point Blue estimates the maximum number of visits per year to be approximately 20. Like the work on ANI, a component of the seabird research which involves nesting habitat restoration and monitoring would require more sporadic visits from September through November. Additional but intermittent visits to areas of PRNS where pinnipeds may be present may also occur for (1) research on other species such as seabirds, sharks, and subtidal mapping, and (2) resource management activities such as non-native plant management and intertidal monitoring.

The proposed IHA would be valid for the statutory maximum of 1 year from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027, if finalized.

Specific Geographic Region

In a continuation of their previous research activities, Point Blue proposes to conduct their research activities in the following locations:

- *SEFI*—located at latitude 37°41′ N and longitude 123°00′ W, SEFI collectively consists of the Southeast Farallon Island and West End Island (see figure 1). These two islands are directly adjacent to each other and separated by only an approximately 30-foot (ft) (9.1-meters (m)) channel. SEFI has a land area of approximately 120 acres (a) (48.6 hectares (ha)) and are part of the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge. The islands are located near the edge of the continental shelf 28 miles (mi) (45.1 kilometers (km)) west of San Francisco, California. The Southeast Farallon Island sits within the waters of the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary. These waters constitute foraging areas for several species of pinnipeds;
- *ANI*—located at latitude (37°06' N and longitude 122°20' W, ANI is found approximately 0.25 mi (0.4 km) offshore of Año Nuevo Point in San Mateo County, California (see figure 2). This small 25 a (10.1-ha) island is part of the 4,000-a (1,618.7-ha) Año Nuevo State Reserve, all of which is owned and operated by California State Parks. ANI lies within the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary and the Año Nuevo State Marine Conservation Area. Like the Southeast Farallon Island, the waters adjacent to ANI serve as foraging areas for pinnipeds and represent EFH for many groundfish, salmon, and pelagic forage fish species; and,
- *PRNS*—located approximately 40 mi (64.4 km) north of San Francisco Bay (see figure 3). The affected area for the purposes of this document are the headland coastal areas of this National Seashore. Waters adjacent to PRNS are foraging areas for pinnipeds. In addition, PRNS lies within the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary and within proximity (approximately 6 mi (9.7 km)) of the Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary.

Point Blue's proposed activities would occur across the locations, within intertidal and coastal habitat or more in-shore areas (*i.e.,* residence locations, trails, pre-designated landing areas). Some site visits may require researchers to travel through pinniped haul-out areas.

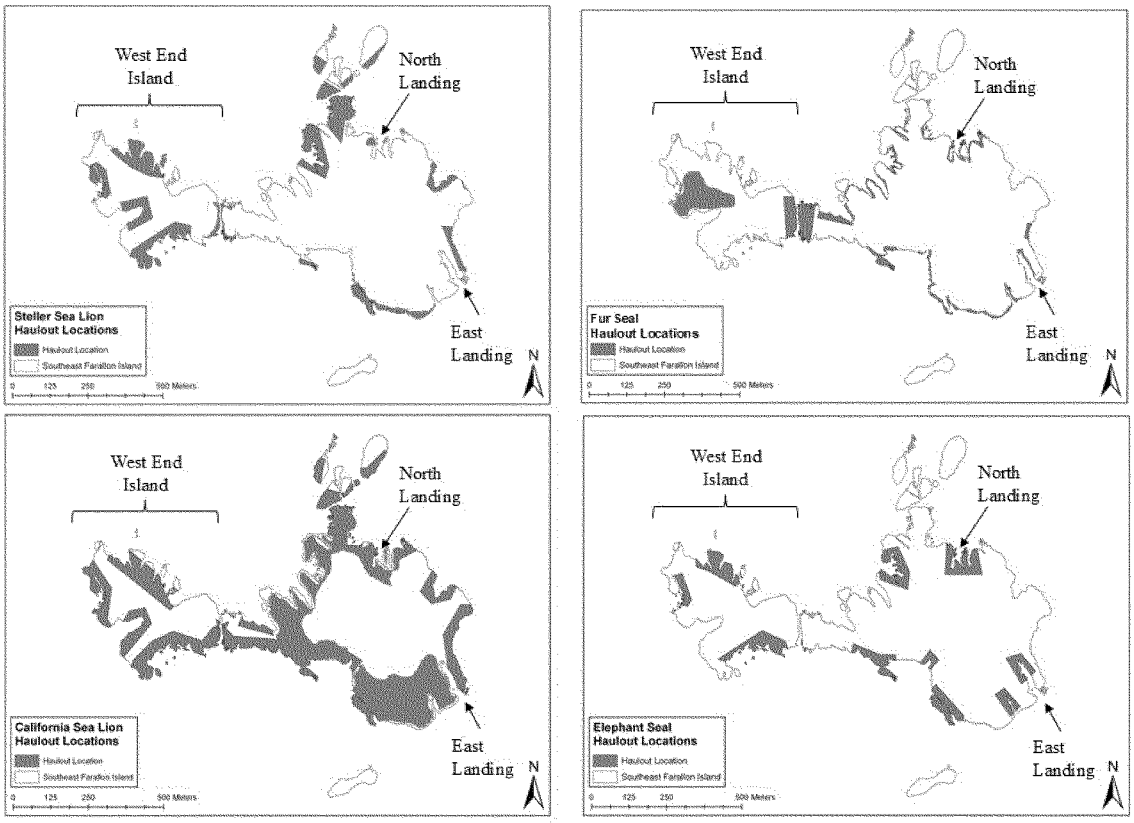

Figure 1 – Map of the SEFI, Associated Landings, And Pinniped Haul Out Areas.

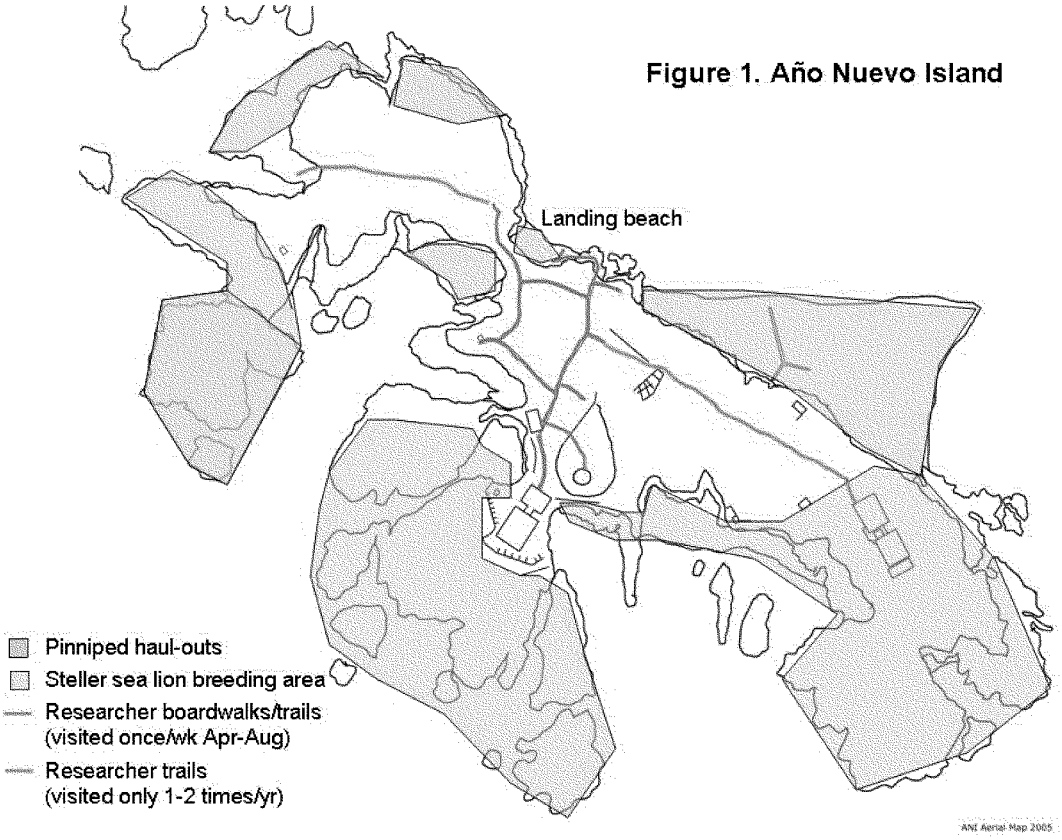

Figure 2 – Map of ANI, Associated Landing Beach, Researcher-Specific Areas, And Pinniped Haul Out Areas.

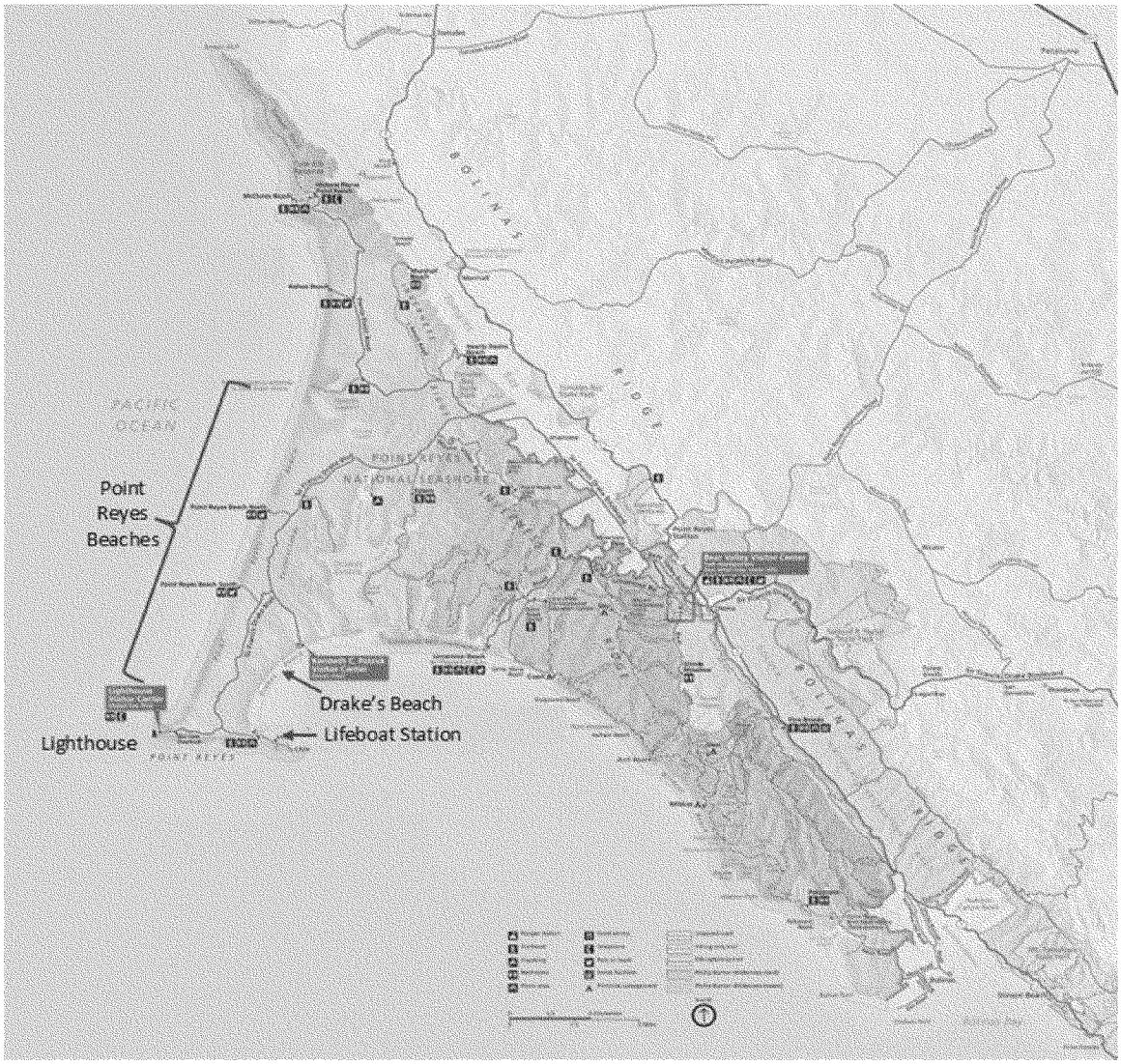

Figure 3 – Map of PRNS, Associated Landing Beach, Researcher-Specific Areas, And Pinniped Haul Out Areas.

Detailed Description of Specific Activity

SEFI

Point Blue has conducted year-round wildlife research and monitoring activities at the South Farallon Islands, part of the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, since 1968, where this work is conducted through a collaborative agreement with the USFWS. Research focusing on seabirds, and some procedures involved in maintaining the SEFI field station may involve incidental take of marine mammals.

Seabird research activities primarily involve observational and hands-on (*i.e.,* netting and banding for capture-mark-recapture) studies of breeding seabirds. Occasionally, researchers may travel to coastal areas of the island to conduct observational seabird research where non-breeding pinnipeds are present. These sorts of tasks include viewing breeding seabirds from an observation blind or censusing shorebirds, which typically necessitates one or two observers. Given the location of SEFI, access to the Refuge involves landing in small boats (*i.e.,* 14- to 18-ft (4.3- to 5.5- m) open motorboats) which are hoisted onto the island using a derrick system. The landing, hoisting, and use of motorboats result in incidental take of pinnipeds.

Research on SEFI is conducted year-round. Most intertidal areas of the island, where marine mammals are present, are rarely visited in seabird research. Point Blue believes that the most potential for take could occur at SEFI's two landings (North Landing and East Landing) and the marine terrace. Boat landings to re-supply the field station typically last between 1 to 3 hours and are conducted every 2 weeks at either the East or North landing sites. Related to the vessel use, these activities involve launching the boat with one operator, while two to four other researchers assisting with the operations from land. As East Landing is the primary research site, all personnel assisting with the landing stay on the loading platform 30 ft (9.1 m) above the water. At North Landing, loading operations occur at the water level in the intertidal zone and boat access.

Researchers typically stay more than 100 ft (30.5 m) away from any pinnipeds

while conducting seabird research and other island maintenance activities or conduct observations from elevated locations greater than 50 ft (15.2 m) above resting pinnipeds. However, Point Blue notes that the pinnipeds on SEFI may react to human presence over a greater distance, including basic activities at the residences, trails, or landings. Pinnipeds may also be spooked by gulls that are responding to human activities. Generally, most of the visits to the pinniped haul out areas are brief (approximately 15 minutes in duration).

ANI

Historically, Point Blue has also conducted seabird research, monitoring, and habitat restoration activities on ANI, part of the Año Nuevo State Reserve, since 1992. Since 2010, this work has been led by collaborating researchers from Oikonos Ecosystem Knowledge whereas all work is conducted through a collaborative agreement with California State Parks.

Non-breeding pinnipeds may occasionally be present on the small beach in the center of the island where the boat is landed. California sea lions may also occasionally be present near a small group of subterranean seabird nest boxes on the island terrace. There are usually two to three researchers involved in island visits. Some procedures, such as accessing the island by boat or conducting seabird research and habitat restoration may involve incidental take of marine mammals.

As described above, research on ANI has been scaled back from previous years and is now conducted via three to four brief visits between April and September. A primary component of the seabird research involves nesting habitat restoration and monitoring, which requires visits from September through November, between the seabird breeding season and the elephant seal pupping season. Most intertidal areas of the island where marine mammals are present are not ever visited during seabird research, except the landing beach, which has the greatest potential for take, as well as just north of this beach up on the island's terrace where a small number of seabird nest boxes are located. In both locations researchers are located greater than 50 ft (15.2 m) away from any pinnipeds which may be hauled out. Landings and visits to nest boxes are brief (approximately 15 minutes). It is necessary that the landing beach be visited upon all arrival and departure activities.

PRNS

The National Park Service (NPS) conducts research, resource management and routine maintenance services at PRNS year-round. This involves seabird research involving maintaining the facilities around PRNS. Both types of work may involve incidental take of marine mammals. Additionally, habitat restoration of the seashore includes restoration and removal of non-native invasive plants, and coastal dune habitat. Non-native plant removal is timed to avoid the breeding seasons of pinnipeds; however, on occasion non-breeding animals may be present at various beaches throughout the year. Additionally, elephant seals are known to haul out near human structures and block access to facilities (*e.g.,* they regularly haul out on a boat ramp at the Lifeboat Station and in car parking lots around the seashore).

Research activities on PRNS include monitoring seabird breeding and roosting colonies, which usually necessitate one or two observers. Field surveys are conducted by small boats (*i.e.,* 14 to 22 ft (4.3 to 6.7 m) open motorboats) that survey along the shoreline. The use of motorboats can result in the incidental take of pinnipeds.

Research at PRNS is conducted year-round (with an estimated maximum number of visits per year of 20), with an emphasis during the seabird nesting season with occasional intermittent visits the rest of the year. As described above in the *Dates and Durations* section, a component of the seabird research involves habitat restoration and monitoring which requires sporadic visits from September-November, between the seabird breeding season and the elephant seal pupping season, but intermittent visits to areas of PRNS where pinniped takes may occur are also conducted for other research, monitoring, and resource management activities. In all locations researchers are located greater than 50 ft (15.2 m) away from any hauled-out pinniped. In addition to research and habitat restoration activities, harassment may occur at landing beaches along Point Reyes Headland and at boat ramps or parking lots if elephant seals are hauled out in those areas.

Proposed mitigation, monitoring, and reporting measures are described in detail later in this document (please see the Proposed Mitigation and Proposed Monitoring and Reporting sections).

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; *https://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 (*https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/find-species*).

Table 1 lists all species or stocks for which take is expected and proposed to be authorized for this action, and summarizes information related to the population or stock, including regulatory status under the MMPA and Endangered Species Act (ESA) and potential biological removal (PBR), where known. 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' SARs). For taxonomy, we follow Committee on Taxonomy. While no serious injury or mortality is anticipated or proposed to be authorized here, PBR and annual serious injury and mortality (M/SI) from anthropogenic sources are included here as gross indicators of the status of the species or stocks 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' 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' Pacific and Alaska SARs (90 FR 13344, March 21, 2025). All values presented in table 1 are the most recent available at the time of publication (including from the draft 2024 SARs) and are available online at: *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammalprotection/marine-mammal-stock-assessments*.

TABLE 1—SPECIES WITH ESTIMATED TAKE FROM THE SPECIFIED ACTIVITIES

Common name[a]	Scientific name	Stock	ESA/ MMPA status; Strategic (Y/N)[b]	Stock abundance (CV; N_{min}; most recent abundance survey)[c]	PBR	Annual M/SI[d]
Order Artiodactyla—Order Carnivora—Pinnipedia						
Family Otariidae (eared seals and sea lions)						
California sea lion	*Zalophus californianus*	U.S	-, -, N	257,606 (N/A; 233,515; 2014).	14,011	≥321.
Steller sea lion	*Eumetopias jubatus*	Eastern U.S	-, -, N	36,308[e] (N/A; 36,308; 2022).	2,178 (U.S. only)	92.3 (U.S. only).
Northern fur seal	*Callorhinus ursinus*	California	-/D; Y	19,634 (N/A; 8,788; 2022).	527	≥1.2.
		Eastern Pacific	-/D; Y	626,618 (0.2, 530,376, 2019)[f].	11,403	373.
Family Phocidae (earless seals)						
Harbor seal	*Phoca vitulina*	California	-, -, N	30,968 (N/A; 27,348; 2012).	1,641	43.
Northern elephant seal	*Mirounga angustirostris*	California breeding	-, -, N	194,907 (N/A; 88,794; 2023).	5,328	11.2.

[a] Information on the classification of marine mammal species can be found on the web page for The Society for Marine Mammalogy's Committee on Taxonomy (*https://marinemammalscience.org/science-and-publications/list-marine-mammal-species-subspecies/*).

[b] 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 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.

[c] NMFS marine mammal SARs online at *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/marine-mammal-stock-assessments*. CV is the coefficient of variation; N_{min} is the minimum estimate of stock abundance. In some cases, a CV is not applicable. N/A indicates data are unknown. UND (undetermined) PBR indicates data are available to calculate a PBR level but a determination has been made that calculating a PBR level using those data is inappropriate (see the SAR for details).

[d] 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, ship strikes). Annual M/SI often cannot be determined precisely and is sometimes presented as a minimum value or range.

[e] Abundance estimates are currently considered unknown.

[f] Survey years = Sea Lion Rock—2014; St. Paul and St. George Islands—2014, 2016, 2018; Bogoslof Island.—2015, 2019.

As indicated above, all five species (six stocks) in table 1 temporally and spatially co-occur with the activity to the degree that take is reasonably likely to occur. While Guadalupe fur seals (*Arctocephalus townsendi*) have been reported in the area, their occurrence is considered extremely rare in that the temporal and/or spatial occurrence of these species is such that take is not expected to occur, and they are not discussed further beyond the explanation provided here. For the past 8 years Point Blue has not observed any Guadalupe fur seals during their surveys of the project areas and therefore NMFS does not anticipate and is not proposing to authorize take of Guadalupe fur seals. Additionally, California (southern) sea otters (*Enhydra lutris nereis*) may be found in the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (see *https://farallones.org/sanctuary-wildlife/marinemammals/*) and possibly nearshore to the South Farallon Island. However, this species is managed by the USFWS (see *https://www.fws.gov/species/southern-sea-otter-enhydra-lutris-nereis*) and therefore not discussed further in this document. For more details on the species that are likely to occur near the project area and may be taken by Point Blue's proposed activities, see Point Blue's IHA application, the SARs, and NMFS' website.

California Sea Lions

California sea lion breeding areas are on islands located in southern California, in western Baja California, Mexico, and the Gulf of California. Rookery sites in southern California are limited to the San Miguel Islands and the southerly Channel Islands of San Nicolas, Santa Barbara, and San Clemente (Carretta *et al.,* 2017). Males establish breeding territories during May through July on both land and in the water. Females come ashore in mid-May and June where they give birth to a single pup approximately 4 to 5 days after arrival and will nurse pups for about a week before going on their first feeding trip. Postpartum females will alternate feeding trips with nursing bouts until the pup is weaned between 4 and 10 months of age (Melin *et al.,* 2000).

Adult and juvenile males will migrate as far north as British Columbia, Canada while females and pups remain in southern California waters in the non-breeding season. In warm water (El Niño) years, some females are found as far north as Washington and Oregon, presumably following prey.

On the Farallon Islands, California sea lions haul out in many intertidal areas year-round, fluctuating from several hundred to several thousand animals. California sea lions at PRNS haul out at only a few locations but will occur on human structures such as boat ramps. The annual population averages around 300 to 500 during the fall through spring months, although on occasion, several thousand sea lions can arrive depending upon local prey resources (S. Allen, unpublished data). On ANI, California sea lions may haul out at one of eight beach areas on the perimeter of the island. The island's average population ranges from 4,000 to 9,500 animals (M. Lowry, unpublished data).

Elevated numbers of strandings of California sea lion pups occurred in Southern California beginning in January 2013, and NMFS declared an unusual mortality event (UME). The UME was confined to pup and yearling California sea lions, many of which were emaciated, dehydrated, and underweight for their age. A change in the availability of sea lion prey, especially sardines, a high value food source for nursing mothers, was a likely contributor to the large number of strandings. Sardine spawning grounds shifted further offshore in 2012 and 2013, and, while other prey were available (market squid and rockfish), these may not have provided adequate nutrition in the milk of sea lion mothers

supporting pups, or for newly weaned pups foraging on their own. Although the pups showed signs of some viruses and infections, findings indicated that this event was not caused by disease, but rather by the lack of high quality, close-by food sources for nursing mothers. Current evidence does not indicate that this UME was caused by a single infectious agent, though a variety of disease-causing bacteria and viruses were found in samples from sea lion pups. Investigating and identifying the cause of this UME was a true public-private effort with many collaborators. The investigative team examined multiple potential explanations for the high numbers of malnourished California sea lion pups observed on the island rookeries and stranded on the mainland in 2013. Per the NMFS website, ''the UME was attributed to malnutrition in juvenile sea lions due to ecological factors causing prey shifts. These prey shifts were most likely driven by unusual oceanographic conditions at the time due to the ''Warm Water Blob'' and El Niño.'' The UME was closed in 2016. For more information, see *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-life-distress/2013-2017-california-sealion-unusual-mortality-event-california*.

Steller Sea Lion

Steller sea lions consist of two distinct population segments (DPSs): the western and eastern DPSs divided at longitude 144° W (Cape Suckling, Alaska). The western segment of Steller sea lions inhabits central and western Gulf of Alaska, Aleutian Islands, as well as coastal waters, and breed in Asia (*e.g.,* Japan and Russia) (Young *et al.,* 2024). The eastern DPS includes animals born east of Cape Suckling, AK (144° W), and includes sea lions living in southeast Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California (Young *et al.,* 2024).

Despite the wide-ranging movements of juveniles and adult males in particular, exchange between rookeries by breeding adult females and males (other than between adjoining rookeries) appears low, although males have a higher tendency to disperse than females (National Marine Mammal Laboratory, 1995; Trujillo *et al.,* 2004; Hoffman *et al.,* 2006). While historically breeding at rookeries located in Southeast Alaska, British Columbia (Canada), Oregon, and California, a new rookery has been established on the outer Washington coast at the Carroll Island and Sea Lion Rock complex (Stocking and Wiles, 2021). This northward shift in the overall breeding distribution has occurred, with a contraction of the range in southern California and new rookeries established in southeastern Alaska (Hastings *et al.,* 2017).

An estimated 50 to 150 Steller sea lions are located along the Farallon Islands while 400–600 may be found on ANI (Point Blue, unpublished data; Lowry, unpublished data). Steller sea lions are not typically present at PRNS (NPS, unpublished data). Overall, counts of non-pups at trend sites in California and Oregon have been relatively stable or increasing slowly since the 1980s (Muto *et al.,* 2017). The South Farallon Island is one of two breeding colonies at the southern end of the Steller sea lion's range.

Northern Fur Seal

The northern fur seal is endemic to the North Pacific Ocean and Bering Sea. Breeding rookeries extend from the Sakhalin Island in the Sea of Okhotsk, Commander Islands, Pribilof, and Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea, and the Farallon and San Miguel Islands off California (Gelatt and Gentry, 2018). Two stocks are recognized in U.S. waters: the Eastern North Pacific and the California stocks. The Eastern North Pacific stock ranges from southern California during winter to the Pribilof Islands and Bogoslof Island in the Bering Sea during summer (Muto *et al.,* 2018). The California stock originated with immigrants from the Pribilof Islands and Russian populations that recolonized San Miguel Island during the late 1950s or early 1960s after northern fur seals were extirpated from California in the 1700s and 1800s (NMFS, 2025). Most northern fur seals at Point Blue research sites are expected to be from the California stock, though some may be from the Eastern North Pacific stock, as adult females and pups from the Pribilof Islands move through the Aleutian Islands into waters off Oregon and California (Muto *et al.,* 2019).

The northern fur seal spends a significant amount of its time at sea, typically in areas of upwelling along the continental slopes, in sea valleys and submarine canyons and over seamounts where it undertakes opportunistic foraging activities (Kajimura, 1981). The remainder of its life is spent on or near rookery islands or haul-outs. While at sea, northern fur seals usually occur singly or in pairs, although larger groups can form in waters rich with prey (Antonelis and Fiscus, 1980; Kajimura, 1981). Northern fur seals dive to relatively shallow depths to feed: 100 to 200 m (328.1 to 656.2 ft) for females, and <400 m (<1,313.34 ft) for males (Geobel *et al.,* 1991; Sterling and Ream, 2004). Tagged adult female fur seals were shown to remain within 200 km (124.3 mi) of the shelf break (Pelland *et al.,* 2014).

Northern fur seals likely numbered in excess of 100,000 animals at the Farallon Islands before being locally extirpated by sealers in the 1800's (Pyle *et al.,* 2001). After more than a 150-year absence, northern fur seals recolonized the Farallon Islands in the 1970's and the first confirmed pup was born in 1996 (Pyle *et al.,* 2001). The Farallon Islands continue to be a breeding site for northern fur seals, with over 1,000 pups born each season (Point Blue, unpublished data). Fur seals in the Farallon Islands typically begin pupping in mid-July with peak population and pup production in late August to early September. A study by Lee *et al.* (2018) found that three colonies of northern fur seals (*i.e.,* South Farallon, San Miguel, and Bogoslof) are all experiencing population growth at levels of 34, 45, and 59 percents, respectively, but were also all growing at rates determined to be the fastest for fur seals worldwide. Per Lowery *et al.* (2021), Northern fur seals are not typically observed on ANI or PRNS; they are more often found on San Miguel Island (located in the Channel Islands) and the Farallon Islands.

Harbor Seal

Pacific harbor seals inhabit near-shore coastal and estuarine areas from Baja California, Mexico, to the Pribilof Islands in Alaska. They are divided into two subspecies: *P.* v. *stejnegeri* in the western North Pacific, near Japan, and *P.* v. *richardii* in the northeast Pacific Ocean. The latter subspecies occurs along the California coast. The California stock of harbor seals ranges from Mexico to the Oregon-California border. In California, 400 to 600 harbor seal haul-out sites are widely distributed along the mainland and offshore islands, and include rocky shores, beaches and intertidal sandbars (Hanan, 1996; Lowry *et al.,* 2008; Carretta *et al.,* 2024).

Harbor seals mate at sea, and females give birth during the spring and summer, although the pupping season varies with latitude. Pups are nursed for an average of 24 days and are ready to swim minutes after being born. Harbor seal pupping takes place at many locations, and rookery size varies from a few pups to many hundred pups. Pupping generally occurs between March and June, and molting occurs between May and July.

On the Farallon Islands, approximately 40 to 120 Pacific harbor

seals haul out in the intertidal areas (Point Blue, unpublished data). Harbor seals at PRNS haul out at nine locations with an annual population of up to 4,000 animals (M. Lowry, unpublished data). On ANI, harbor seals may haul out at one of eight beach areas on the perimeter of the island, and the island's average population ranges from 100 to 150 animals (M. Lowry, unpublished data).

Northern Elephant Seal

Northern elephant seals range in the eastern and central North Pacific Ocean, from as far north as Alaska to as far south as Mexico. Northern elephant seals spend much of the year, generally about 9 months, in the ocean. They are usually underwater, diving to depths of about 1,000 to 2,500 ft (330 to 800 m) for 20- to 30 minute intervals with only short breaks at the surface. They are rarely seen out at sea for this reason. While on land, they prefer sandy beaches.

The northern elephant seal breeding population is distributed from central Baja California, Mexico to the Point Reyes Peninsula in northern California. Along this coastline, there are 13 major breeding colonies. Northern elephant seals breed and give birth primarily on offshore islands (Stewart *et al.,* 1994), from December to March (Stewart and Huber, 1993). Males feed near the eastern Aleutian Islands and in the Gulf of Alaska, and females feed farther south, south of 45° N (Stewart and Huber, 1993; Le Boeuf *et al.,* 1993).

In mid-December, adult males begin arriving at rookeries, closely followed by pregnant females on the verge of giving birth. Females give birth to a single pup, generally in late December or January (Le Boeuf and Laws, 1994) and nurse their pups for approximately 4 weeks (Reiter *et al.,* 1991). Upon pup weaning, females mate with an adult male and then depart the islands. The last adult breeders depart the islands in mid-March. The spring peak of elephant seals on the rookery occurs in April, when females and immature seals (approximately 1 to 4 years old) arrive at the colony to molt (a 1-month process) (USFWS, 2013). The year's new pups remain on the island throughout both of these peaks, generally leaving by the end of April (USFWS, 2013). The lowest numbers of elephant seals present at rookeries occurs during June, July, and August, when sub-adult and adult males molt. Another peak number of young seals returns to the rookery for a haul-out period in October, and at that time, some individuals undergo partial molt (Le Boeuf and Laws, 1994).

Northern elephant seals are present on the islands and in the waters surrounding the South Farallones year-round for either breeding or molting; however, they are more abundant during breeding and peak molting seasons (Le Boeuf and Laws, 1994; Sydeman and Allen, 1999). Northern elephant seals began recolonizing the South Farallon Islands in the early 1970s (Stewart *et al.,* 1994) at which time the colony grew rapidly. Point Blue's average monthly counts of elephant seals at the South Farallon Islands from 2000 to 2009 ranged from 20 individuals in July to nearly 500 individuals in November (USFWS, 2013). During breeding season, the population at ANI ranges from 900 to 1,000 adults, while another ~2,000 adults are found at PRNS (Mark Lowry, unpublished data; NPS, unpublished data).

Potential Effects of Specified Activities on Marine Mammals and their Habitat

This section provides a discussion of the ways in which components of the specified activity may impact marine mammals and their habitat. The Estimated Take section later in this document 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 content of this section, 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 whether those impacts are reasonably expected to, or reasonably likely to, adversely affect the species or stock through effects on annual rates of recruitment or survival.

Presence of Humans

Visual and acoustic stimuli generated by the appearance of field personnel and motorboat operations may have the potential to cause Level B harassment of pinnipeds hauled out on SEFI, ANI, and PRNS. This section includes a summary and discussion of the ways that the types of stressors associated with the specified activity (*e.g.,* personnel presence and motorboats) have been observed to impact marine mammals. This discussion may also include reactions that we consider rising to the level of a take and those that we do not consider rising to the level of a take. This section provides background information on potential effects of these activities. For a discussion of the manner in which the mitigation measures will be implemented, and how the mitigation measures will shape the anticipated impacts from this specific activity, see the Proposed Mitigation section below.

Reactions to human presence, if any, depend on species, state of maturity, experience, current activity, reproductive state, time of day, and many other factors (Richardson *et al.,* 1995; Southall *et al.,* 2007; Weilgart, 2007). These behavioral reactions from marine mammals are often shown as: changing durations of surfacing and dives, number of blows per surfacing, or moving direction and/or speed; reduced/increased vocal activities; changing/cessation of certain behavioral activities (such as socializing or feeding); visible startle responses or aggressive behavior; avoidance of areas; and/or flight responses (*e.g.,* pinnipeds flushing into the water from haul-outs or rookeries). If a marine mammal does react briefly to human presence by changing its behavior or moving a small distance, the impacts of the change are unlikely to be significant to the individual, let alone the stock or population. However, if visual stimuli from human presence displaces marine mammals from an important feeding or breeding area for a prolonged period, impacts on individuals and populations could be significant (*e.g.,* Lusseau and Bejder, 2007; Weilgart, 2007). Numerous studies have shown that human activity can flush harbor seals off haul-out sites (Allen *et al.,* 1985; Suryan and Harvey, 1999; Ruiz-Mar *et al.,* 2022; Bankhead *et al.,* 2023). The Hawaiian monk seal (*Neomonachus schauinslandi*) has been shown to avoid beaches that have been disturbed often by humans (Kenyon, 1972; Gerrodette and Gilmartin, 1990). In one case, human disturbance appeared to cause Steller sea lions to desert a breeding area at Northeast Point on St. Paul Island, Alaska (Kenyon, 1962), a behavior demonstrated at other locations as well (Kucey, 2005; Chayahara *et al.,* 2024).

The appearance of field personnel may have the potential to cause Level B harassment of any pinnipeds hauled out at research sites. Disturbance may result in reactions ranging from an animal simply becoming alert to the presence of field personnel (*e.g.,* turning the head, assuming a more upright posture) to flushing from the haul-out site into the water. NMFS does not consider the lesser reactions to constitute behavioral harassment, or Level B harassment takes, but rather assumes that pinnipeds that flee some distance or change the speed or direction of their movement in response to the presence of field personnel are behaviorally harassed, and thus subject to the taking by Level

B harassment. Animals that respond to the presence of field personnel by becoming alert, but do not move or change the nature of locomotion as described, are not considered to have been subject to behavioral harassment.

Use of Motorboats

Point Blue has indicated that they may require the use of small waterborne vessels (*i.e.,* small motorboats) to deliver both personnel and supplies to and from SEFI, ANI, and PRNS. Previous studies have been performed where the results demonstrate that pinnipeds generally return to their sites and do not permanently abandon haul-out sites after exposure to motorboats (discussed further below for Henry and Hammil (2001) and Johnson and Acevedo-Gutierrez (2007)).

In 1997, Henry and Hammil (2001) conducted a study to measure the impacts of small boats (*i.e.,* kayaks, canoes, motorboats and sailboats) on harbor seal haul-out behavior in Metis Bay, Quebec, Canada. During that study, the authors noted that the most frequent disturbances (*n*=73) were caused by lower speed, lingering kayaks, and canoes (33.3 percent) as opposed to motorboats (27.8 percent) conducting high-speed passes. The seal's flight reactions could be linked to a surprise factor by kayaks and canoes, which approach slowly, quietly, and low on the water making them look like predators. However, the authors note that, once the animals were disturbed, there did not appear to be any significant lingering effect on the recovery of numbers to their pre-disturbance levels. In conclusion, the study showed that boat traffic at current levels had only a temporary effect on the haul-out behavior of harbor seals in the Metis Bay area.

In 2004, Acevedo-Gutierrez and Johnson (2007) evaluated the efficacy of buffer zones for watercraft around harbor seal haul-out sites on Yellow Island, Washington. The authors estimated the minimum distance between the vessels and the haul-out sites, categorized the vessel types, and evaluated seal responses to the disturbances. During the course of the 7-weekend study, the authors recorded 14 human-related disturbances that were associated with stopped powerboats and kayaks. During these events, hauled out seals became noticeably active and moved into the water. The flushing occurred when stopped kayaks and powerboats were at distances as far as 453 and 1,217 ft (138 and 371 m) away, respectively. The authors note that the seals were unaffected by passing powerboats, even those approaching as close as 128 ft (39 m), possibly indicating that the animals had become tolerant of the brief presence of the vessels and ignored them. The authors reported that, on average, the seals quickly recovered from the disturbances and returned to the haul-out site in less than or equal to 60 minutes. Seal numbers did not return to pre-disturbance levels within 180 minutes of the disturbance, less than one-quarter of the time observed. The study concluded that the return of seal numbers to pre-disturbance levels and the relatively regular seasonal cycle in abundance throughout the area counter the idea that disturbances from powerboats may result in site abandonment (Johnson and Acevedo-Gutierrez, 2007). As a general statement from the available information, pinnipeds exposed to intense (approximately 110 to 120 decibels referenced to 20 microPascals (µPa)) airborne non-pulsed sounds often leave haul-out areas and seek refuge temporarily (minutes to a few hours) in the water (Southall *et al.,* 2007).

The potential for striking marine mammals is a concern with vessel traffic. Typically, the reasons for vessel strikes are fast transit speeds, lack of maneuverability, or not seeing the animal because the boat is so large. Point Blue's staff and field personnel will access areas at slow transit speeds in small boats that are easily maneuverable, minimizing any chance of any accidental strikes.

Avoidance

Avoidance is the displacement of an individual from an area or migration path as a result of the presence of a sound or other stressors and is one of the most obvious manifestations of disturbance in marine mammals (Richardson *et al.,* 1995). Avoidance is qualitatively different from the flight response but also differs in the magnitude of the response (*i.e.,* directed movement, rate of travel, *etc.*). Often avoidance is temporary, and animals return to the area once the noise has ceased. Acute avoidance responses have been observed in captive porpoises and pinnipeds exposed to a number of different sound sources (Kastelein *et al.,* 2001; Finneran *et al.,* 2003; Kastelein *et al.,* 2006a; Kastelein *et al.,* 2006b; Kastelein *et al.,* 2015a; Kastelein *et al.,* 2015b; Kastelein *et al.,* 2018). Short-term avoidance of seismic surveys, low frequency emissions, and acoustic deterrents have also been noted in wild populations of odontocetes (Bowles *et al.,* 1994; Goold, 1996; Goold and Fish, 1998; Morton and Symonds, 2002; Hiley *et al.,* 2021) and to some extent in mysticetes (Malme *et al.,* 1984; McCauley *et al.,* 2000; Gailey *et al.,* 2007). Longer-term displacement is possible, however, which may lead to changes in abundance or distribution patterns of the affected species in the affected region if habituation to the presence of the sound does not occur (*e.g.,* Blackwell *et al.,* 2004; Bejder *et al.,* 2006; Teilmann *et al.,* 2006). Although NMFS acknowledges that most research and literature cited here is related to cetaceans, who are not expected to be harassed or taken by Point Blue's specified activities, we include these to provide context as pinnipeds behaviorally react in a similar manner when expected to an external stimulus (*e.g.,* human presence, noise, *etc.*) when onshore or in the water.

While NMFS expects that hauled out pinnipeds may avoid the Point Blue field personnel and/or motorboats, we do not expect that these effects will be more than temporary. The pinnipeds on SEFI, ANI, and PRNS have high site fidelity; any external stimuli would be expected to be fleeting in nature, and easily avoidable, meaning that the pinnipeds, if performing avoidance behaviors during Point Blue's specified activities, would be able to resume their original behaviors once the stimulus has ended.

Flight Response

A flight response is a dramatic change in normal movement to a directed and rapid movement away from the perceived location of a sound source. The flight response differs from other avoidance responses in the intensity of the response (*e.g.,* directed movement, rate of travel). Relatively little information on flight responses of marine mammals to anthropogenic signals exists, although observations of flight responses to the presence of predators have occurred (Connor and Heithaus, 1996). The result of a flight response could range from brief, temporary exertion and displacement from the area where the signal provokes flight to, in extreme cases, marine mammal strandings (Evans and England, 2001). There are limited data on flight response for marine mammals in water; however, there are examples of this response in species on land. For instance, the probability of flight responses in Dall's sheep (*Ovis dalli dalli*) (Frid, 2003), hauled out ringed seals (*Phoca hispida*) (Born *et al.,* 1999), Pacific brant (*Branta bernicla nigricans*), and Canada geese (*B. canadensis*) increased as a helicopter or fixed-wing aircraft more directly approached groups of these animals (Ward *et al.,* 1999). However, it should be noted that

response to a perceived predator does not necessarily invoke flight (Ford and Reeves, 2008), and whether individuals are solitary or in groups may influence the response.

Behavioral disturbance can also impact marine mammals in more subtle ways. Increased vigilance may result in costs related to diversion of focus and attention (*i.e.,* when a response consists of increased vigilance, it may come at the cost of decreased attention to other critical behaviors such as foraging or resting). These effects have generally not been observed in marine mammals, but studies involving fish and terrestrial animals have shown that increased vigilance may substantially reduce feeding rates and efficiency (*e.g.,* Beauchamp and Livoreil, 1997; Fritz *et al.,* 2002; Purser and Radford, 2011). In addition, chronic disturbance can cause population declines through reduction of fitness (*e.g.,* decline in body condition) and subsequent reduction in reproductive success, survival, or both (*e.g.,* Harrington and Veitch, 1992; Daan *et al.,* 1996; Bradshaw *et al.,* 1998).

Many animals perform vital functions, such as feeding, resting, traveling, and socializing, on a diel cycle (24-hour cycle). Disruption of such functions resulting from reactions to stressors such as sound exposure are more likely to be significant if they last more than one diel cycle or recur on subsequent days (Southall *et al.,* 2007). Consequently, a behavioral response lasting less than 1 day and not recurring on subsequent days is not considered particularly severe unless it could directly affect reproduction or survival (Southall *et al.,* 2007). Note that there is a difference between multi-day substantive behavioral reactions and multi-day anthropogenic activities. For example, just because an activity lasts for multiple days does not necessarily mean that individual animals are either exposed to activity-related stressors for multiple days or, further, exposed in a manner resulting in sustained multi-day substantive behavioral responses.

There are other ways in which disturbance, as described previously, could result in more than Level B harassment of marine mammals. They are most likely to be consequences of stampeding (which is typically a response to startle and/or avoidance behaviors), a potentially dangerous occurrence in which large numbers of animals succumb to mass panic and rush away from a stimulus. These situations are: (1) pinnipeds falling when entering the water at high-relief locations; (2) extended separation of mothers and pups; and (3) crushing of pups by larger animals during a stampede. However, NMFS does not expect any of these scenarios to occur at SEFI, ANI, or PRNS. As stated, there is the risk of injury if animals stampede towards shorelines with precipitous relief (*e.g.,* cliffs); however, field personnel will take precautions, such as moving slowly and staying close to the ground, to ensure that any flushes do not result in a stampede of pinnipeds heading to the sea. Per previous ITAs issued to Point Blue, reports that stampedes have been extremely rare at their survey locations in the past. Furthermore, no research activities would occur at or near pinniped rookeries. Breeding animals are concentrated in areas where field personnel would not visit, so NMFS does not expect mother and pup separation or crushing of pups during flushing. If pups should be present at any Point Blue research sites, field personnel will avoid visiting that particular site.

Habituation

Habituation can occur when an animal's response to a stimulus wanes given repeated exposure, usually in the absence of unpleasant associated events (Wartzok *et al.,* 2003). Animals are most likely to habituate to sounds that are predictable and unvarying. It is important to note that habituation is appropriately considered as a ''progressive reduction in response to stimuli that are perceived as neither aversive nor beneficial,'' rather than as, more generally, moderation in response to human disturbance (Bejder *et al.,* 2009). The opposite process is sensitization, when an unpleasant experience leads to subsequent responses, often in the form of avoidance, at a lower level of exposure. As noted, behavioral state may affect the type of response. For example, animals that are resting may show greater behavioral change in response to disturbing sound levels than animals that are highly motivated to remain in an area for feeding (Richardson *et al.,* 1995; National Research Council, 2003; Wartzok *et al.,* 2003). Controlled experiments with captive marine mammals have shown pronounced behavioral reactions, including avoidance of loud sound sources (Ridgway *et al.,* 1997; Finneran *et al.,* 2003). Observed responses of wild marine mammals to loud impulsive sound sources (typically seismic airguns or acoustic harassment devices) have been varied but often consist of avoidance behavior or other behavioral changes suggesting discomfort (Morton and Symonds, 2002; see also Richardson *et al.,* 1995; Nowacek *et al.,* 2007).

Stress Response

An animal's perception of a threat may be sufficient to trigger stress responses consisting of some combination of behavioral responses, autonomic nervous system responses, neuroendocrine responses, or immune responses (*e.g.,* Seyle, 1950; Moberg, 2000). In many cases, an animal's first and sometimes most economical (in terms of energetic costs) response is behavioral avoidance of the potential stressor. Autonomic nervous system responses to stress typically involve changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and gastrointestinal activity. These responses have a relatively short duration and may or may not have a significant long-term effect on an animal's fitness.

Neuroendocrine stress responses often involve the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal system. Virtually all neuroendocrine functions that are affected by stress, including immune competence, reproduction, metabolism, and behavior, are regulated by pituitary hormones. Stress-induced changes in the secretion of pituitary hormones have been implicated in failed reproduction, altered metabolism, reduced immune competence, and behavioral disturbance (*e.g.,* Moberg, 1987; Blecha, 2000). Increases in the circulation of glucocorticoids are also equated with stress (Romano *et al.,* 2004).

The primary distinction between stress (which is adaptive and does not normally place an animal at risk) and ''distress'' is the cost of the response. During a stress response, an animal uses glycogen stores that can be quickly replenished once the stress is alleviated. In such circumstances, the cost of the stress response would not pose serious fitness consequences. However, when an animal does not have sufficient energy reserves to satisfy the energetic costs of a stress response, energy resources must be diverted from other functions. This state of distress will last until the animal replenishes its energetic reserves sufficient to restore normal function.

Relationships between these physiological mechanisms, animal behavior, and the costs of stress responses are well studied through controlled experiments and for both laboratory and free-ranging animals (*e.g.,* Holberton *et al.,* 1996; Hood *et al.,* 1998; Jessop *et al.,* 2003; Krausman *et al.,* 2004; Lankford *et al.,* 2005). Stress responses due to exposure to anthropogenic sounds or other stressors and their effects on marine mammals have also been reviewed (Fair and Becker 2000; Romano *et al.,* 2002b) and,

more rarely, studied in wild populations (*e.g.,* Romano *et al.,* 2002a). These and other studies lead to a reasonable expectation that some marine mammals will experience physiological stress responses upon exposure to acoustic stressors and that it is possible that some of these would be classified as ''distress.'' However, distress is an unlikely result of these projects based on observations of marine mammals during previous, similar research and monitoring projects.

Effects on Marine Mammal Habitat

There are no habitat modifications associated with the proposed activity other than the presence of Point Blue field personnel to perform the proposed activities and to monitor animals. No substantial construction is anticipated to occur for this proposed project, only activities that rise to the level of maintenance, removal, and installation, which are all expected to be over a small footprint when compared to the entire size of the available habitat on the South Farallon Islands. While field personnel may be somewhat residential in some areas during the work necessary for the proposed activities, the field personnel will be traveling to different research sites indicating that their presence in any one specific area is most likely temporary. Thus, NMFS does not expect that the proposed activity would have any effects on marine mammal habitat and NMFS expects that there will be no long- or short-term physical impacts to pinniped habitat on SEFI, ANI, or PRNS.

Proposed Activities on Potential Foraging Habitat

Marine mammal prey (*e.g.,* fish) varies by species, season, and location. However, as all of Point Blue's proposed activities are occurring onshore and the prey species for pinnipeds are located in the ocean, NMFS does not expect the proposed activities to affect the habitat, availability, or presence of prey for pinnipeds.

Estimated Take

This section provides an estimate of the number of incidental takes proposed for authorization through the IHA, which will inform NMFS' consideration of ''small numbers,'' the negligible impact determinations, and impacts on subsistence uses.

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).

Takes proposed for authorization would be by Level B harassment only, in the form of behavioral reactions for individual marine mammals resulting from exposure to field personnel and associated noise. Based on the nature of the activity, Level A harassment is neither anticipated nor proposed to be authorized. As described previously, no serious injury or mortality is anticipated or proposed to be authorized for this activity. Below we describe how the proposed take numbers are estimated.

Marine Mammal Occurrence and Take Calculation and Estimation

Here we describe the proposed estimate of the take that is reasonably likely to occur and proposed for authorization.

The occurrence data are based upon Point Blue's unique expertise in this area and their local, collaborative work with other partners who work in the Farallon Islands (Point Blue Conservation Science, unpublished data; G. McChesney, USFWS, personal observation). NMFS further reviewed other nearby and recent actions by Point Blue and partners when considering the proposed take numbers (*i.e.,* the Point Blue Conservation Science's seabird research activities in central California (80 FR 10066, February 25, 2015; 81 FR 34978, June 1, 2016; 82 FR 31759, July 10, 2017; 83 FR 31372, July 5, 2018; 85 FR 9740, February 20, 2020; and 86 FR 27991, May 25, 2021) and the USFWS research, monitoring, and management activities on SEFI (90 FR 42750, September 4, 2025)). Next, we further reviewed previous monitoring reports from Point Blue for their previous projects in the specified geographic area. Point Blue's requested take authorization numbers were calculated based on the number of each species generally present on the islands (particularly near haul-outs, survey areas, and near boat landings) and frequency of the planned activities. Point Blue's research activities are expected to affect all ages and sexes of pinnipeds, except very young pups because Point Blue field personnel will not enter or approach breeding areas close enough to cause a disturbance to young pups or their mothers.

Upon review of Point Blue's request take, NMFS determined that the numbers were reasonable and supported by their unique and extensive expertise in the specified geographic area. For almost all species, Point Blue requested the same annual take estimates as initially requested in their most recent ITA (*i.e.,* ITR with subsequent 5-year LOA (86 FR 27991, May 25, 2021)). However, for two species (California sea lions and northern fur seals), given increases in the populations in the project areas, Point Blue has requested increased take for these species. NMFS agrees with this justification and the values presented in the ITA application and carries these forward here into this notice of proposed IHA.

In table 2, NMFS shows the reported take observations from previous Point Blue ITAs. We also include the previous number of authorized takes under the ITR/LOA given the same or similar values that have been requested by Point Blue for this proposed project. In table 3, NMFS shows the take, by Level B harassment only, that propose to authorize for Point Blue's 2026–2027 activities.

TABLE 2—REPORTED TAKE OBSERVATIONS FROM PREVIOUS ITAS, AND REQUESTED ANNUAL TAKES BY LEVEL B HARASSMENT

Species	Reported observations and take from previous IHA							Reported observations and take from previous ITRs and 5-year LOA					Authorized takes from more recent project ITA (ITRs and 5-year LOA)	
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Annual	5-year
California sea lion	10,048	36,417	23,173	22,752	17,487	10,408	.....	34,510	38,344	33,402	38,516	39,269	40,059	200,295
Northern elephant seal	145	175	119	202	85	79	.....	90	67	10	6	26	239	1,195
Harbor seal	284	292	175	234	229	82	.....	91	99	94	88	72	321	1,605

TABLE 2—REPORTED TAKE OBSERVATIONS FROM PREVIOUS ITAS, AND REQUESTED ANNUAL TAKES BY LEVEL B HARASSMENT—Continued

Species	Reported observations and take from previous IHA							Reported observations and take from previous ITRs and 5-year LOA					Authorized takes from more recent project ITA (ITRs and 5-year LOA)	
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Annual	5-year
Steller sea lion ..	59	31	32	35	5	50	.....	15	9	50	36	36	72	360
Northern fur seal	0	0	0	0	0	1	.....	0	0	13	25	26	20	100

Note: NMFS was unable to locate monitoring data related to the 2020 survey activities (85 FR 9740, February 20, 2020).

TABLE 3—PROPOSED TAKE, BY LEVEL B HARASSMENT ONLY, AND PERCENTAGE OF MMPA STOCK PROPOSED TO BE TAKEN

Species	Stock	Estimated stock abundance (NMFS SARs)	Proposed take for authorization	Percent of stock to be taken
California sea lion	U.S	257,606	50,000	19.4
Northern elephant seal	California breeding	194,907	239	0.1
Harbor seal	California	30,968	321	1.04
Steller sea lion	Eastern U.S	36,308	72	0.2
Northern fur seal [a]	California	19,634	120	0.61
	Eastern Pacific	626,618		<0.1

[a] As either stock may occur in the project area, 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.

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, NMFS considers 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, as well as subsistence uses. 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, and impact on operations.

The mitigation requirements described in the following were proposed by Point Blue in its adequate and complete application or are the result of subsequent coordination between NMFS and Point Blue. Point Blue has agreed that all the mitigation measures are practicable. NMFS has fully reviewed the specified activities and the mitigation measures to determine if the mitigation measures would result in the least practicable adverse impact on marine mammals and their habitat, as required by the MMPA, and has determined the proposed measures are appropriate. NMFS describes these below as proposed mitigation requirements and has included them in the proposed IHA.

In addition to the measures described later in this section, Point Blue would follow these general mitigation measures:

- Takes proposed for authorization, by Level B harassment only, would be limited to the species and numbers listed in table 3. Research activities would be required to be halted upon observation of either a species for which incidental take was not authorized or for a species for which incidental take has been authorized but the number of takes has been met, entering or is within the harassment zone, if the IHA is issued;
- The taking by Level A harassment, serious injury, or death of any of the species listed in tables 1 or 3 or any taking of any other species of marine mammal would be prohibited and would result in the modification, suspension, or revocation of the IHA, if issued. Any taking exceeding the authorized amounts listed in table 3 would be prohibited and would result in the modification, suspension, or revocation of the IHA, if issued;
- Ensure that relevant Point Blue staff are trained prior to the start of all research activities, so that responsibilities, communication procedures, marine mammal monitoring protocol, and operational procedures are clearly understood. New personnel joining during the project must be trained prior to commencing work;
- Point Blue staff must avoid direct physical interaction with marine mammals during construction activity;
- Point Blue staff must maintain a safe distance for field personnel from marine mammals and not approach any marine mammal while conducting research, unless it is absolutely necessary to flush a marine mammal in order to continue conducting research (*i.e.,* if a site cannot be accessed or sampled due to the presence of pinnipeds);s
- Conduct seabird observations in an observation blind, shielded from the view of hauled-out pinnipeds where possible;
- Monitoring for offshore predators and not approach hauled out pinnipeds if predators are present.

Based on our evaluation of Point Blue's proposed measures, as well as

other measures considered by NMFS, NMFS has preliminarily determined that the proposed mitigation measures provide the means of 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 while conducting the activities. Effective reporting is critical to both 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/or
- Mitigation and monitoring effectiveness.

The monitoring and reporting requirements described in the following were proposed by Point Blue in its adequate and complete application or are the result of subsequent coordination between NMFS and Point Blue following receipt of the application. Point Blue has agreed that all of the mitigation measures are appropriate. NMFS describes these below as proposed requirements and has included them in the proposed IHA.

Point Blue will contribute to the knowledge of pinnipeds on SEFI, ANI, and PRNS by noting observations of: (1) unusual behaviors, numbers, or distributions of pinnipeds, such that any potential follow-up research can be conducted by the appropriate personnel; (2) tag-bearing carcasses of pinnipeds, allowing transmittal of the information to appropriate agencies and personnel; and (3) rare or unusual species of marine mammals for agency follow-up.

Proposed monitoring requirements in relation to the research activities will include observations made by Point Blue. Information recorded will include species counts (with numbers of pups/juveniles) of animals present before approaching, numbers of observed disturbances (based on the scale below), and descriptions of the disturbance behaviors during the project activities, including location, date, and time of the event. For consistency, any reactions by pinnipeds to field personnel will be recorded according to a three-point scale, as shown in table 4. We specifically note that only observations of disturbance levels 2 and 3 would be recorded as takings. The lead biologist/project-lead in the field will serve as an observer to record the incidental take.

TABLE 4—LEVELS OF PINNIPED BEHAVIORAL DISTURBANCE

Level	Type of response	Definition
0	Observation	Observation by field personnel from a distance; no disturbance to pinniped.
1	Alert	Seal head orientation or brief movement in response to disturbance, which may include turning head towards the disturbance, craning head and neck while holding the body rigid in a u-shaped position, changing from a lying to a sitting position, or brief movement of less than twice the animal's body length.
2	Movement	Movements in response to the source of disturbance, ranging from short withdrawals at least twice the animal's body length to longer retreats over the beach, or if already moving a change of direction of greater than 90 degrees.
3	Flush	All retreats (flushes) to the water.

Note: Only Levels 2 and 3 would be recorded as takes by Level B harassment.

Furthermore, the following monitoring protocols for Point Blue are proposed:

(1) Record of date, time, and location (or closest point of ingress) of each visit to the research site;

(2) Composition of the marine mammals sighted, such as species, gender, and life history stage (*e.g.,* adult, sub-adult, pup);

(3) Information on the numbers (by species) of marine mammals observed during the activities;

(4) Estimated number of marine mammals (by species) that may have been harassed during the activities;

(5) Behavioral responses or modifications of behaviors that may be attributed to the specific activities and a description of the specific activities occurring during that time (*e.g.,* human approach, vessel approach, helicopter take-off/landing/flyover); and

(6) Information on the weather, including the tidal state and horizontal visibility.

In addition, observations regarding the number and species of any marine mammals observed (either in the water or hauled out at, or adjacent to, a research site) are recorded as part of field observations during research activities. Information regarding physical and biological conditions pertaining to a site, as well as the date and time that research was conducted, will also be recorded. This information will be incorporated into a monitoring report (along with other information, as required below in the *Proposed Reporting* section) for NMFS and all raw data will be provided.

Proposed Reporting

Point Blue would be required to submit an annual draft summary report on all research activities and marine mammal monitoring results to NMFS within 90 days following the end of the project activities or 60 calendar days

prior to the requested issuance of any subsequent IHA for similar activity at the same location, whichever comes first. The draft summary report would include an overall description of the research activities completed, a narrative regarding marine mammal sightings, and associated raw PSO data sheets (in electronic spreadsheet format). Specifically, the report must include:

- Dates and times (begin and end) of all marine mammal monitoring;
- Observer locations during marine mammal monitoring; and
- Environmental conditions during monitoring periods (at beginning and end of observer shift and whenever conditions change significantly), including Beaufort sea state and any other relevant weather conditions including cloud cover, fog, sun glare, and overall visibility to the horizon, and estimated observable distance.
- Upon observation of a marine mammal, the following information must be reported:
- Name of the observer who sighted the animal(s) and observer location and activity at the time of the sighting;
- Time of the sighting;
- Identification of the animal(s) (*e.g.,* genus/species, lowest possible taxonomic level, or unidentified), observer confidence in identification, and the composition of the group if there is a mix of species;
- Estimated number of animals (min/max/best estimate);
- Estimated number of animals by cohort (*e.g.,* adults, juveniles, neonates, group composition, etc.);
- Animal's closest point of approach;
- Description of any marine mammal behavioral observations (*e.g.,* observed behaviors such as feeding or traveling), including an assessment of behavioral responses thought to have resulted from the activity (*e.g.,* no response or changes in behavioral state such as ceasing feeding, changing direction, flushing, etc.);
- Number of marine mammals detected, by species; and
- Detailed information about implementation of any mitigation, a description of specified actions that ensured, and resulting changes in behavior of the animal(s), if any.

If no comments are received from NMFS within 30 days after the submission of the draft summary report, the draft report would constitute the final report. If Point Blue receives comments from NMFS, a final summary report addressing NMFS' comments must be submitted within 30 days after receiving comments.

Additionally, Point Blue would be required to undertake some situational reporting for the NMFS West Coast Regional Office (562–980–3230) for marked or tag-bearing pinnipeds or carcasses, or any unusual behaviors, distributions, or numbers of pinnipeds.

Reporting Injured or Dead Marine Mammals

If, at any time, the specified activities clearly causes the take of a marine mammal in a prohibited manner such as an injury (*i.e.,* Level A harassment), serious injury, or mortality, Point Blue would immediately cease the specified activities and report the incident to the NMFS Office of Protected Resources (*PR.ITP.MonitoringReports@noaa.gov* and *ITP.Cockrell@noaa.gov*) and the NMFS West Coast Regional Stranding Coordinator (562–980–3230). The report must include the following information:

(1) Time and date of the incident;

(2) Description of the incident;

(3) Environmental conditions (*e.g.,* wind speed and direction, Beaufort sea state, cloud cover, and visibility);

(4) Description of all marine mammal observations in the last 24 hours preceding the incident;

(5) Species identification or description of the animal(s) involved;

(6) Fate of the animal(s); and

(7) Photographs or video footage of the animal(s) (if the equipment is available).

Activities would not resume until NMFS is able to review the circumstances of the prohibited take. NMFS will work with Point Blue to determine what measures are necessary to minimize the likelihood of further prohibited take and ensure MMPA compliance. Point Blue may not resume the activities until notified by the NMFS Office of Protected Resources.

In the event that Point Blue discovers an injured or dead marine mammal and determines that the cause of the injury or death is unknown and the death is relatively recent (*e.g.,* in less than a moderate state of decomposition), Point Blue would immediately report the incident to the Office of Protected Resources (*PR.ITP.MonitoringReports@noaa.gov* and *ITP.Cockrell@noaa.gov*) and the West Coast Regional Stranding Coordinator (562–980–3230). The report must include the same information identified in the paragraph above. Activities may continue while NMFS reviews the circumstances of the incident. NMFS will work with Point Blue to determine whether additional mitigation measures or modifications to the activities are appropriate.

In the event that an injured or dead marine mammal is discovered and it is determined that the injury or death is not associated with or related to the activities authorized in any issued IHA (*e.g.,* previously wounded animal, carcass with moderate to advanced decomposition, or scavenger damage), Point Blue would report the incident to the NMFS Office of Protected Resources (*PR.ITP.MonitoringReports@noaa.gov* and *ITP.Cockrell@noaa.gov*) and the West Coast Regional Stranding Coordinator ((562) 980–3230) within 24 hours of the discovery. Point Blue would provide photographs, video footage (if available), or other documentation of the stranded animal sighting to NMFS and the Marine Mammal Stranding Network. Activities may continue while NMFS reviews the circumstances of the incident.

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, the discussion of our analysis applies to all of the species listed in tables 1 and 3, given that the anticipated effects of this activity on these different marine mammal stocks are expected to be similar. There is little

information about the nature or severity of the impacts, or the size, status, or structure of any of these species or stocks that would lead to a different analysis for this activity.

For reasons stated previously in this document and based on the following factors, NMFS does not expect Point Blue's proposed specified activities to cause long-term behavioral disturbance that would be expected to negatively impact an individual animal's fitness, or result in injury, serious injury, or mortality. Although Point Blue's activities may disturb marine mammals, NMFS expects those impacts to occur to localized groups of animals at or near survey and activity sites. Behavioral disturbance is expected to be limited to short-term startle responses and localized behavioral changes due to the short duration. Minor and brief responses including short-duration startle reactions, are not likely to constitute disruption of behavioral patterns, such as migration, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering. These short duration disturbances (in many cases animals are expected to return within a short period of time) will generally allow marine mammals to reoccupy haul-outs relatively quickly; therefore, these disturbances would not be anticipated to result in long-term disruption of important behaviors. Therefore, NMFS does not expect mother and pup separation or crushing of pups during stampedes.

Regarding effects on animals at SEFI, ANI, and PRNS, field personnel will delay ingress into the landing areas, where possible, until after the pinnipeds enter the water and will cautiously operate vessels at slow speeds. Some limited effects from motorboats have been known to occur (see the *Effects* section), but any behavioral effects are expected to be temporary and fleeting, given the motorboat would be primarily transiting, landing, or leaving the study sites. Limited access would be permitted to pinniped pupping areas so mother-pup separation is not expected to occur.

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 any of the species or stocks through effects on annual rates of recruitment or survival:

- No serious injury or mortality is anticipated or authorized;
- No take by Level A harassment is expected, or is proposed for authorization;
- The intensity of anticipated takes by Level B harassment is relatively low for all stocks. Level B harassment would be in the form of behavioral disturbance, resulting in temporary avoidance of the project areas and locations where Point Blue staff are working;
- Given pinnipeds are carnivores, no prey species (*i.e.,* fish) would be impacted by the proposed activities or would only be temporarily impacted for a short duration during in-water activities (*i.e.,* small motorboat use). Therefore, any associated impacts on marine mammal foraging is not expected to result in significant or long-term consequences for individuals, or to accrue to adverse impacts on their populations;
- No impacts to pinniped habitat are anticipated; and
- Only limited behavioral disturbance in the form of short-duration startle reactions is expected, and mitigation requirements employed by field personnel (*e.g.,* moving slowly, hushed voices) should further decrease disturbance levels.

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 monitoring and mitigation 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 previously, only the take of small numbers of marine mammals 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 (see 86 FR 5322, January 19, 2021). Additionally, other qualitative factors may be considered in the analysis, such as the temporal or spatial scale of the activities.

The instances of take NMFS has proposed to authorize is below one-third of the estimate stock abundance for all species. The number of animals proposed for authorization that could be taken from these stocks would be considered small relative to the relevant stocks' abundances even if each estimate taking occurred to a new individual. While there is a potential for some individuals to be taken multiple times per day, Point Blue staff would count them as separate takes if they cannot be individually identified.

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 would be taken relative to the population size of the affected species or stocks.

Unmitigable Adverse Impact Analysis and Determination

There are no relevant subsistence uses of the affected marine mammal stocks or species implicated by this action. Therefore, NMFS has 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

No incidental take of ESA-listed species is proposed for authorization or expected to result from this activity. Therefore, NMFS has determined that formal consultation under section 7 of the ESA is not required for this action.

Proposed Authorization

As a result of these preliminary determinations, NMFS proposes to issue an IHA to Point Blue for conducting seabird research activities on SEFI, ANI, and PRNS from July 1, 2026, through June 30, 2027, provided the previously mentioned mitigation, monitoring, and reporting requirements are incorporated. A draft of the proposed IHA can be found at *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/marine-mammal-protection/incidental-take-authorizations-research-and-other-activities.*

Request for Public Comments

We request comments on our analyses, the proposed authorization, and any other aspect of this notice of proposed IHA for the proposed project. 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 1-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 Description of Proposed Activities section of this notice is planned or (2) the activities as described in the Description of Proposed 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).

(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: April 8, 2026.

Kimberly Damon-Randall,

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

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BILLING CODE 3510–22–P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Agency Information Collection Activities; Submission to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for Review and Approval; Comment Request; Alaska Region Amendment 80 Program

AGENCY: National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of information collection, request for comment.

SUMMARY: The Department of Commerce, in accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (PRA), invites the general public and other Federal agencies to comment on proposed, and continuing information collections, which helps us assess the impact of our information collection requirements and minimize the public's reporting burden. The purpose of this notice is to allow for 60 days of public comment preceding submission of the collection to OMB.

DATES: To ensure consideration, comments regarding this proposed information collection must be received on or before June 9, 2026.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments to Adrienne Thomas, NOAA PRA Officer, at *NOAA.PRA@noaa.gov.* Please reference OMB Control Number 0648–0565 in the subject line of your comments. All comments received are part of the public record and will generally be posted on *https://www.regulations.gov* without change. Do not submit Confidential Business Information or otherwise sensitive or protected information.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Requests for additional information or specific questions related to collection activities should be directed to Steve Whitney, Fisheries Management Specialist, National Marine Fisheries Service, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802–1668, 907–586–7228, *Steven.whitney@noaa.gov.*

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

I. Abstract

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Alaska Regional Office, is requesting extension of a currently approved information collection that contains applications for permits and transfers necessary for NMFS to manage the Amendment 80 Program (A80 Program).

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.,* the Secretary of Commerce is responsible for the conservation and management of marine fishery resources within the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of the United States through NOAA/NMFS. NMFS Alaska Region manages the EEZ off Alaska under the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Groundfish of the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Management Area (BSAI FMP) and the Fishery Management Plan for Groundfish of the Gulf of Alaska. The North Pacific Fishery Management Council recommended A80 to the BSAI FMP in June 2006 (72 FR 52668, September 14, 2007). A80 allocates several BSAI non-pollock trawl groundfish species among trawl fishery sectors, established a limited access privilege program (LAPP), and facilitated the formation of harvesting cooperatives in the non-American Fisheries Act (non-AFA) trawl catcher/processor sector. More information on the A80 Program is provided on the NMFS Alaska Region website at *https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/alaska/sustainable-fisheries/bering-sea-and-aleutian-islands-amendment-80-groundfish-trawl-fishery.*

This collection contains applications used by an individual or business entity to apply for A80 quota share, used by A80 quota shareholders to transfer A80 quota share and to apply for an A80 limited access fishery permit, used by A80 cooperatives to apply for cooperative quota and transfer cooperative quota, used by cooperatives or Community Development Quota groups to exchange community quota for one eligible flatfish species with community quota of a different eligible flatfish species, and used by A80 vessel owners to replace their vessels. This information collection also contains the appeals process for an application that is denied.

The type of information collected includes information on the applicants, transferors, transferees, permits, vessels, quota share, cooperative quota, and flatfish harvest quota.

NMFS uses this information to establish eligibility to receive A80 quota share, cooperative quota, and permits; transfer and assign harvest quota; replace vessels used in the A80 Program; determine A80 species initial total allowable catch assignments; determine which vessels must be tracked for catch accounting; and review ownership and control information to ensure that quota share and cooperative quota use caps are not exceeded.