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NOAA SEEKS COMMENT ON MARINE MAMMAL INCIDENTAL HARASSMENT REQUEST

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is seeking comment on a proposal to issue annual incidental harassment permits to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida for air-to-surface weapons testing. The permit is valid for a period of five years and will expire in 2011.

The U.S. Air Force is requesting the permit while conducting precision strike weapons tests in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Florida. Incidental harassment of dolphins and small whales may occur as the result of air-to-surface impacts.

Weapons testing would occur two to four times per year and launched from aircraft to targets located approximately 15 to 24 nautical miles offshore of the Eglin base. Targets are floating platforms and barges, and detonations could potentially affect marine mammals.

Under the proposal, no detonations will occur if marine mammals or sea turtles are detected within a predetermined safety zone designed to protect marine species from hearing impairment, injury or mortality. NOAA Fisheries Service has preliminarily determined that these detonations will not result in more than incidental harassment of marine mammals and would have no more than a negligible impact on these stocks.

An authorization under the Marine Mammal Protection Act is warranted to protect marine life in the vicinity of the exercise. The implementation of extensive mitigation and monitoring measures, including vessel and aerial marine mammal surveys prior to the firing exercises, will assist in limiting impacts to bottlenose dolphins, spotted dolphins, and dwarf and pygmy sperm whales that may be in the vicinity of the detonations to behavioral harassment.

The NOAA Fisheries Service will accept comments on the application and proposed authorization through Sept. 4, 2006. Please address comments to Michael Payne, Chief, Permits, Conservation and Education Division, Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. A copy of the application and *Federal Register* notice can be obtained by contacting the same office or online at:
<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental.htm#iha>

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