

**North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan
Southeast U.S. Implementation Team, October 23 and 24, 2014
Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Reserve**

KEY OUTCOMES MEMORANDUM

I. Overview

The North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan Southeast U.S. Implementation Team (SEIT) conducted a two-day meeting on October 23 and 24 at the Guana Tolomato Matanzas National Estuarine Reserve in Northeast Florida. The SEIT's Forum was conducted from 9:00am to 4:50pm on October 23rd and was open to the public. The SEIT deliberated from 9:00am to 3:00pm on October 24th. The Forum agenda was planned with input from the SEIT in order to facilitate priority information updates and discussion with participants and SEIT members. Agendas from both days are attached. The October 24th SEIT deliberations focused on the following primary objectives:

- SEIT Business
- Forum Review
- Aerial Survey Revision
- South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Snapper-Grouper Fishery Management Plan Regulatory Amendment 16
- Mid-Atlantic Right Whale Recovery
- Cumulative Impacts

This Key Outcomes memorandum summarizes the primary results of the SEIT deliberations on October 24th. In general, the synthesis integrates the main themes discussed at the meeting and are presented in five main sections: Overview, Participants, Meeting Materials, Key Outcomes, and Next Steps. The Key Outcomes section is further segmented into the following six sections:

- Welcome and Meeting Kick Off. This section provides a brief overview of meeting purpose and agenda review.
- SEIT business
- Focused SEIT discussions
- Consensus Actions. This section summarizes consensus recommendations of the SEIT.
- Other. This section summarizes other topics discussed during the meeting.

II. Participants

The SEIT meeting was attended by 11 of the 13 Team members: Nancy Allen, Gerald Baldwin, Clay George, Amy Knowlton, Bill McLellan, Katie Moore, Becky Shortland, Leslie Ward-Geiger

(Team Lead), Tom Wright, and Sharon Young. Lance Garrison and Bill Kavanaugh were unable to attend. Barb Zoodsma and Jim McLaughlin represented NOAA Fisheries. Caroline Good was invited to participate as a subject matter expert during the SEIT's deliberation on right whale recovery in the mid-Atlantic.

III. Meeting Materials

The following materials were provided to SEIT members:

- The final meeting agenda was distributed via email prior to the meeting.
- Draft Speed Talk Open Session Ground Rules

IV. Key Outcomes

Below is a summary of the main topics and items discussed during the meeting. This summary is not intended to be a meeting transcript and is not necessarily in chronological order of discussions. Rather, it provides an overview of the main topics covered, the primary points and options raised in the discussions, and areas of full or emerging consensus.

A. Welcome and Meeting Kick Off

The meeting kicked off with a brief review of the meeting purpose and agenda. The Team agreed to adjust the agenda to accommodate C. Good's availability during the morning.

B. SEIT Business

The SEIT discussed possible dates for the spring SEIT meeting. The following dates contained the fewest number of conflicts for Team members:

- 1st preference: last week of April (Tues-Thurs)
- 2nd preference: first week of May (Tues-Thurs)

C. Focused Discussions

Forum Review

L. Ward reviewed day 1 presentations to facilitate Team deliberations. Deliberations included the following key points:

- Review of right whale sightings in the Northeast. What is cause of distribution shifts - changes with food resources? Entanglement rate or sightings of entangled individuals seems to be increasing –since 2011. This change, or perceived change, coincides with changes in NE sighting distribution and perhaps gear distribution as well. NEAq is investigating this possible change. If there has been an increase in entangled whales, will this effect body condition/calving rates?
- Mortality Update. The apparent aggregation of mortalities in the Hudson Canyon region (off New York/New Jersey) was noted. CINAR seems to be working well for supporting

stranding response. Some discussion on the relative probability of carcass detection, how many carcasses are never observed?, and the idea of estimating detection probability based on vessel distribution, environmental factors, and whale distribution.

- The Team noted that there had been no documented cases of ship struck right whales in the Southeast U.S. for a number of years.
- The SEIT discussed cumulative impacts of seismic surveys along the East Coast. The type and amount of activity is unprecedented and there seems to be a lack of coordination for reviewing projects. Further discussion of the topic was tabled until the afternoon.
- FL Sea Grant Vessel Study. The Team noted that the completed study will be useful to: a) guide outreach efforts targeting recreational vessel operators and update the SEIT's Education and Outreach Strategy, and b) inform analyses of cumulative impacts of future proposed activities.
- Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS). In the interest of time, the SEIT did not discuss PORTS and a potential PORT-related recommendation. Rather, the Team agreed to discuss the subject more thoroughly during a future call and after more information was obtained. In the meantime, the URL for the Jacksonville PORTS website is: <http://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov/ports/index.html?port=jx>
- Atlantic Coast Port Access Route Study (ACPARS). Members discussed that the ACPARS should be informed by whale distribution in addition to other traditional marine inputs - the preference is to avoid having PARS seemingly completed then potentially having the inclusion of whale data modify the PARS output/result.

U.S. Mid-Atlantic (MAUS) Right Whale Recovery

The SEIT reviewed the MAUS strategy and Caroline Good provided additional information relative to her contract with NMFS SEFSC to compile right whale-related data for the MAUS:

- NMFS has not provided AMAPPS data to Caroline (L. Garrison and D. Palka are data holders).
Certain passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) datasets are also outstanding. The SEIT noted they are not as concerned about these outstanding data since the NEFSC is consolidating and analyzing East Coast PAM data.
- C. Good hopes to have a final report by the end of December/January. She's contemplating two publications: one on distribution and the other on sightings vs. modeling.

SEIT members noted their ongoing interest in C. Good's assessment, based on her SEFSC-contracted work, of techniques might be most effective for monitoring right whale presence and use in the MAUS.

The SEIT discussed, at length, how to quantify/visualize right whale use of MAUS. The challenge is that, at present, occurrence data under-represent actual right whale use of the MAUS.

Identifying areas where there have been gaps in surveys effort is important. There may be migratory rate/speed and spatial differences between demographic groups (e.g. mother/calf pairs may be slower, occur closer to shore, etc.).

Other MAUS-specific notables mentioned by C. Good include:

- Water temperature is an important variable in MAUS
- Right whales have frequently been spotted around capes
- The habitat north of Cape Hatteras is very different from that south of Cape Hatteras
- There is an information gap for the area between northern New Jersey –New York Bight area

C. Good was also awarded a SERO contract to consolidate MAUS anthropogenic-related data within the area from Massachusetts to the South Carolina/North Carolina border.

Anthropogenic stressors include vessel traffic, fishing activities, and alternative energy projects, etc.

- For vessel traffic, possible data sources include AIS, VMS, Fisheries vessels, AC PARS, South Carolina/Savannah Lanes Analysis
- For fishing activities and locations, possible data source includes Industrial Economics; Incorporated (prepared the co-occurrence model for the ALWTRT).
- Energy exploration/development G&G and wind projects should also be included
- Military exercise polygons

With regards to alternative energy projects in the MAUS, one SEIT member advocated that critical areas (e.g. calving area, McLellan’s slot, etc.) should be avoided until the effects of these various novel projects are better understood. Put initial wind farms in less “important areas.”

Aerial Survey Revision

B. Zoodsma asked if anyone had questions or thoughts on the aerial surveys and how they were being conducted. She was interested in revisiting the topic since the fall SEIT meeting had been cancelled and the surveys would have been discussed in more detail at that time. General thoughts were raised:

- A large amount of effort is being invested into detecting whales in the calving area, but then we don’t know what’s going on with calves after they leave the calving area. Genetics work is valuable to help gain insights into this information gap (juvenile survival rates).
- The calving area seems to be comparatively reliable regarding right whale distribution and habitat use and therefore ability to collect data -particularly, relative to distributional changes that are being observed in the Northeast.

- Assess how the surveys are performing in regards to stated key objectives.

SAFMC S-G Reg Amendment 16

The SEIT is concerned that the proposed amendment will increase entanglement risk to right whales. The Team noted that NMFS recently published an ALWTRP rule to reduce vertical line entanglement risk to right and other large whales and S-G Reg-16 is counter to that rule which assumed the present seasonal closure of the BSB trap/pot fishery. SERO should maintain the seasonal BSB closure or only allow BSB trap/pot fishing that has a negligible change in risk to right whales. One SEIT member suggested the ALWTRT should consider this matter.

Cumulative Impacts

The SEIT deliberated over the challenges associated with assessing cumulative impacts when new projects are proposed. Some of the points raised included:

- A list of organizations and activities would be helpful -a “cumulative activities library” for right whales.
- Need a single data source/model for right whales. Coast wide atlas of whales/habitat, etc. What is status of Cetsound?
- Permits are required: Letter of Authorization (LOA) if Serious injuries or mortalities are expected, or an Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) for other injuries or disturbance.
- We are lacking real world verification of acoustic models.
- Need an acoustic 101 class: what are source level and propagation distances for various sounds produced during seismic surveys.

One member noted that seismic survey data is not shared between investigators. Consequently, the same area could be surveyed by multiple entities.

The SEIT then deliberated about possible monitoring and mitigation programs for seismic surveys:

- Work/guard boats should record acoustic data to learn more about source levels, etc.
- Request/provide transect location information
- Directed response measurements on acoustic playbacks/sounds on right whales.

D. Consensus Actions

1. C. George will investigate if GDNR boating guides contain right whale information.
2. B. Zoodsma will attempt to get details on New York Bight aerial survey project that SERO PRD contributed funds to in FY14.
3. L. Garrison will investigate how/if AMAPPS data can be transferred to C. Good.

4. The SEIT MAUS work group will update MAUS strategy to include wind and seismic energy activities.
5. Barb will touch base with Vicki Cornish, Marine Mammal Commission, on MMC strategic plan recommendation to have workshop on needs for G&G exploration.
6. T. Pitchford and C. George will investigate if there are adequate vessel towing capabilities for carcasses in offshore areas outside the limits to NOAA RHIBs.
7. Someone needs to investigate and identify appropriate devices for tracking carcasses (radar reflector, telemetry buoy, etc.)
8. B. Zoodsma will investigate if NOAA Fisheries has developed policy/guidance relative to retrieving/handling floating large whale carcasses being scavenged by sharks.
9. Team members that represent agencies will look into how they investigate cumulative impacts.

E. Consensus Recommendations

Consider modeling exercise to determine if a whale dies at point x, what is the probability it will be detected. Examine carcass movement and detectability differences in areas of varying levels of vessel traffic (i.e. probability of opportunistic sightings), whale distribution, aerial survey effort (also high detectability probability), and weather patterns. Goal: determine if whale dies at point x what is the probability we will detect it. Geographic scope: SER (Chesapeake? East Coast?)

F. Other

One SEIT member wondered if it was possible to detect right whales via satellites.

The SEIT discussed right and other large whale carcass retrieval challenges relative to safely securing, towing, and landing carcasses in the Southeast U.S. Considerations included:

- Appropriate vessels for towing large carcasses are typically slow moving. Airplane and faster vessels may be needed to initially relocate and deploy carcass tracking device.
- White sharks have been noted scavenging off floating carcasses. Are there any existing protocols that prevent carcass retrieval if sharks are observed in the area?

V. Next Steps

Conduct a conference call during the week of Dec 15th to plan for fall meeting and touch base on next steps.

In the future (date to be determined) discuss PORTS in more detail. Items to be more fully considered include PORTs capabilities and purpose, possible integration of right whale-related outreach, and message content.