

**North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan
Southeast U.S. Implementation Team, October 06 and 07, 2015
Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Brunswick, GA**

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 06 and 07, 2015 at the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Office in Brunswick, GA. The SEIT's Forum was conducted from 9:00am to 5pm on October 6th and was open to the public. The SEIT deliberated from 8:00am to 3:00pm on October 7th. 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 7th SEIT deliberations focused on the following primary objectives:

- SEIT Business
- Forum Review
- "Species in the Spotlight" model Five Year Action Plan
- Mid-Atlantic Right Whale Recovery strategy review
- Post-Tagging Monitoring Plan for LIMPET-Tagged Right Whales

This Key Outcomes memorandum summarizes the primary results of the SEIT deliberations on October 7th. 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 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 10 of the 12¹ Team members: Nancy Allen, Clay George, Amy Knowlton, Becky Shortland, Leslie Ward (Team Lead), Tom Wright, Sharon Young, Lance Garrison, Mike Getchell, and Bill Kavanaugh. Bill McLellan was unable to attend and Katie Moore attended via teleconference. Barb Zoodsma, Kate Swails (Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office), Claire Surrey-Marsden, and Jim McLaughlin represented NOAA Fisheries. David Laist, Marine Mammal Commission, observed the SEIT deliberations.

¹ Does not include recently vacated seat (see "SEIT Business" section).

III. Meeting Materials

The following materials were provided to SEIT members:

- The final meeting agenda (distributed via email prior to the meeting), and
- Aerial survey effort maps.

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. L. Ward noted the presence of D. Laist, Marine Mammal Commission, and invited him to say a few words.

The Marine Mammal Commission is an oversight agency that provides guidance to federal agencies that affect marine mammals. The Commission is interested in having a better understanding of the work of the SEIT.

B. SEIT Business

B. Zoodsma announced that Gerard Baldwin had resigned from the SEIT due to time constraints. B. Zoodsma informed the Team that NMFS is considering recovery needs with which the SEIT could assist. Based on those recovery tasks and relative expertise needed, NMFS will identify a suitable candidate to fill the vacancy.

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

- 1st preference: second week of May 2016 (Tues-Thurs)
- 2nd preference: first week of May 2016 (Tues-Thurs)

C. Focused Discussions

Forum Review

Leslie Ward reviewed day 1 presentations to facilitate Team deliberations. The following key points were discussed:

- “Species in the Spotlight” model Five Year Action Plan - Although NOAA is not planning to develop an East Coast-wide Five-Year Action Plan for North Atlantic right whales, it might be helpful to have a similar plan for Southeast recovery efforts. Such a plan may serve as an interim tool complimentary to the existing, but dated, national recovery plan. The proposed plan should highlight more current issues such as the

- Mid-Atlantic US strategy and migratory corridor data. B.Zoodsma suggested Five-Year plans for other species could be used as models.
- Right whale sightings in the Northeast. Aggregations of right whales are not being seen in areas where they've been seen historically.
 - Stock Assessment Reports may be impacted by the inability to find/detect right whales.
 - Relative to search effort: Perhaps a more adaptive search strategy with real-time location predictions is needed. An expanded survey effort will be necessary to sight whales that have shifted their distribution to outside of their typical habitats. Perhaps Southeast U.S. aerial survey efforts should become even more flexible to expand search area if the Southeast U.S. becomes more important to population monitoring efforts.
 - Increased tagging efforts might also be beneficial.
 - What are the implications of the shift in habitat use in the Northeast U.S. on right whale use of the Southeast U.S.?
 - Get abundance estimate based on mark/recapture data (not traditional line transect data).
 - Team members recommended a Southeast right whale population monitoring working group. Objectives would include investigating within season and inter-annual abundance trends and residency patterns. Potential working group members include Jeff Hostetler, Tim Gowan, Lance Garrison, Julien Martin, Philip Hamilton, Clay George, and Richard Pace. Other candidates would be considered after initial assessment.
 - Winter weather considerations. An increase in the number of poor weather days may result in more conflicts between onwater research teams working with right whales.
 - B. Zoodsma pointed out that NOAA-funded/sponsored work has priority for working with right whales that are spotted by aerial survey teams.
 - Communicating and planning between teams is essential. SERO can also send return emails to researchers when they send in their research notifications. Pre-season coordination call discussed.
 - Mid-Atlantic passive acoustics and combined visual/acoustic detection calibration efforts in Mid-Atlantic. Updates on this topic presented on day 1 were discussed in the context of Mid-Atlantic strategy progress (see below). The number of PAM efforts and data sources is challenging to track and coordinate, also noted potential information gaps regarding Mid-Atlantic ambient noise levels and detection distances.
 - South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Snapper-Grouper Fishery Management Plan Reg-16. A few different points came up, including:
 - Whether or not NOAA Law Enforcement is aware of new black sea bass regulations.
 - Southeast U.S. aerial surveys should note observations (including zero data) of trap/pot gear in final report.

- Is Golden crab fishing effort in NE Florida increasing?

US Mid-Atlantic (MAUS) Right Whale Recovery Strategy Review

The SEIT reviewed new focuses, objectives and progress in the MAUS strategy. K. Swails, Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office, participated in the discussion.

- NOAA Fisheries scientists are working on NOAA acoustic detections summary. Variability in detection distance detected -winter introduces storm noise. Scientists are investigating if dedicated tracking arrays (for detection distances, vocalization behavior) are needed or planned for MAUS.
- UNC Wilmington and Duke also doing monthly MAUS aerial surveys year-round.
- Coordination between NMFS and other agencies/organizations/individuals conducting surveys or operating in MAUS is needed to ensure that right whale sightings (both photographed and not photographed) are forwarded in a timely manner to NMFS/SAS and NEAq (photo-id catalog curators).

The SEIT further discussed opportunistic data input and the need for it to be as close to real-time data as possible to better understand right whale movements in the MAUS.

- Ensure partner agency (Navy, USCG) personnel on the water know how to report sightings in the Mid-Atlantic. B. Zoodsma and K. Swails will investigate NMFS guidance on reporting sightings and A. Knowlton will investigate NEAq guidance.
- Right whale sightings data should be integrated into and across online mapping efforts. Is NARW Consortium sightings database automatically going to Ocean Biogeographic Information System Spatial Ecological Analysis of Megavertebrate Populations (OBIS-SEAMAP)? (If so, contributors should be notified.) NOAA and NAVY should be using all existing data sets for managerial decisions (not missing any possible SEUS or MAUS data sets such as Duke NARW models)
- Additional opportunities may exist to find other whales in the vicinity of tagged whales
- Marine Mammal Commission understands the need for baseline data from broad regions for highly migratory species. Also noted the stranding program needs more support.

Oil and Gas Exploration

Limiting the number of seismic surveys through information sharing seems a logical method for minimizing acoustic, etc. impacts to marine species.

- Team members noted that the oil and gas leasing plan 50 NM buffer could be lifted after the 2017-2022 BOEM lease plan. Seismic testing may presently occur closer to shore depending on permit constraints.
- Agency reps on the SEIT should ensure consistency in mitigation requests/comments to BOEM and monitor project vessel activities.
- The SEIT noted this is a highly dynamic and concerning topic. Team members requested an update on Oil and Gas Surveys at next SEIT meeting particularly in light of the status of IHA outcomes thought to be available February 2016.

Southeast US Early Warning Surveys (EWS)

The SEIT reviewed aircraft survey areas and sea-state constraints with regards to EWS objectives (i.e. ship strike avoidance). Members discussed the idea of removing sea state 3 constraints on aerial surveys. B. Zoodsma noted that she would have to investigate if there were any EWS MOA-related constraints that would restrict surveys to sea state 3 or less.

Right Whale tagging project – post-tagging monitoring plan

R. Allen called in to join the SEIT for this discussion. R. Allen reviewed SEIT reviewed last season's tagging efforts and noted that the goal for the upcoming season is to tag five whales with LIMPETS. He reviewed the tagging teams post-tagging monitoring efforts and solicited additional ideas for enhancing tag monitoring and follow-up efforts. Suggestions included:

- Develop a list of potential MAUS and Northeast region partners to increase effort to re-sight tagged whales.
- Develop better communication plan to make coast-wide partners aware of project.

D. Consensus Actions

- 1) B. Zoodsma will obtain and share 5-year Action plan examples with the SEIT.
- 2) B. Zoodsma will brief SERO leadership on SEIT recommendation to develop a Southeast Population monitoring working group and subsequently notify C. George as to SERO's deliberations.
- 3) A. Knowlton will send NEAq sighting protocols to SEIT members.
- 4) K. Swails and B. Zoodsma will investigate right whale sighting guidance provided by NMFS and share their findings with the Team.
- 5) L. Garrison will investigate detection distances and noise levels in the MAUS and if dedicated tracking arrays are needed or planned for MAUS.
- 6) B. Zoodsma will verify that NMFS OLE is aware of the new Black Sea Bass fishery regulations. She will also update the EWS flight protocols to request observation (including zero data) of trap/pot gear in final report.
- 7) B. Zoodsma will investigate if NOAA IHA staff are using Duke NARW models.
- 8) N. Allen will help coordinate discussions between NMFS, NAVY, and Duke to determine feasibility of incorporating NARW survey data into the Duke maps/model outputs of density estimation.
- 9) N. Allen and K. Moore will look over MAUS watch-stander protocols to verify they have access to appropriate guidance for reporting right whale sightings.
- 10) B. Zoodsma will investigate the possibility of adjusting EWS flight restrictions.
- 11) A. Knowlton will put out tagged-whale alerts on APB and injury list.

E. Consensus Recommendations

- Develop a Southeast Population monitoring working group. Objectives of the group would be to investigate inter-annual abundance trends within the calving season and better understand residency patterns

- Improve communications between research groups during the calving season to promote efficiency in field work as intended by permit and proactively de-conflict various on-water operations.
- BOEM should notify NMFS of seismic activities within the Southeast Region, similar to Navy notifications of major training exercises

F. Other

V. Next Steps

- Conduct a conference call to plan for spring meeting and touch base on next steps.
- Investigate best way to proceed with possible 5-year plan

