Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

TESTIMONY OF

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

ON

H.R. 1934: THE MARINE MAMMAL RESCUE ASSISTANCE ACT OF 1999

BEFORE THE

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). NMFS, along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, administers the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), which authorizes the rescue of and response to stranded marine mammals.

Marine mammals have beached themselves, or become "stranded" for millennia, but only in recent decades have scientists begun to thoroughly investigate these events, searching for causes and uncovering clues to the biological and ecological mysteries of these ocean animals. For many species of whales and dolphins, much, if not all, of what science knows about their biology comes from data collected at strandings.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss with you the organization of the federal marine mammal stranding response network, federal/private partnerships for responding to strandings, and the information that scientists, conservationists, and managers gain through the analyses of data collected from stranded marine mammals - both dead and live. I will also describe the role that NMFS plays in overseeing stranding

network operations, marine mammal health assessment, and marine mammal conservation and management. Finally, I will discuss the need for additional effort and resources related to marine mammal health and stranding programs.

National Marine Mammal Stranding Network Background

Although scientists have examined stranded marine mammals for many years, the first systematic effort to build a coordinated network in the United States took place in 1972 as a result of efforts by Dr. James Mead of the Smithsonian Institution. NMFS became involved after the MMPA Reauthorization of 1980. For the next decade, each NMFS Region operated an independent network. The mass mortality event of bottlenose dolphins on the East Coast in 1987-88 prompted two actions that have greatly improved the response to marine mammal strandings. First, NMFS sponsored a program review of the stranding network. That review found that stranding protocols and policies varied from region to region, that volunteers who make up the network received little training or support, and that the potential scientific information available from stranded animals was not being fully developed. Since that review, NMFS has worked to resolve and address each of these issues. The second action was the enactment of the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Act in 1992. The Act focused attention on stranding activities and charged NMFS with using stranding networks and other sources to collect information on basic health parameters in marine mammals. It also required NMFS to put into place a mechanism to respond to unusual mortality events.

The Act established the NMFS Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. This program consists of the National Marine Mammal Stranding Program; the National Marine Mammal Biomonitoring Program which includes the contaminants monitoring component, the disease monitoring component, research into the impacts of disease, harmful algal blooms and contaminants on health, and the quality assurance program; the National Marine Mammal Tissue Bank; and the response to unusual marine mammal mortality events. Information collected from stranding network participants contributes to each of these components, and these data are integrated into the overall program. For example, over the past 7 years, the contaminants monitoring program has examined tissues from 669 animals, and the National Marine Mammal Tissue Bank has archived 1,181 tissues from 425 animals, representing 28 species.

Since 1992, NMFS has made considerable progress in collecting information on marine mammal diseases and causes of mortalities and in developing plans to resolve management issues such as reducing ship strikes in large whales. The Agency's response to unusual marine mammal mortality events also has improved in effectiveness over the years. These achievements are remarkable. Future priorities for the program include the addition of a marine mammal serum bank, continued assessment and monitoring of diseases and contaminant levels with a greater focus on evaluating the health or population impacts, increased effort in establishing baseline data of marine mammal health in coastal populations, and increased response to and investigation of unusual mortality events. As the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program continues to grow and develop, the stranding network will surely play an integral part in the continued assessment and monitoring of marine mammal population health.

In recent years, the National Marine Mammal Stranding Network has developed into a very professional operation conducted almost exclusively by volunteers - one of the most successful volunteer efforts in the country. This network consists of partnerships among federal, state and local governments, museums, academic institutions, aquaria, and other non-profit organizations. Letters of Agreement (LOAs) are issued by NMFS authorizing each stranding facility in the network to respond to strandings of live or dead animals. Each LOA holder operates under the supervision of a NMFS Regional Stranding Coordinator who reports to a single National Stranding Coordinator. Regional Stranding Coordinators collect and archive basic data on

marine mammal strandings from network participants in their region and work with participants to improve stranding response and data collection. Marine mammal stranding network participants carry out many vital activities including detecting and investigating unusual mortality events, recovering carcasses to examine them for disease or cause of death, and collecting data and tissues from dead stranded marine mammals for detailed analysis. In addition, these dedicated volunteers educate the public about marine conservation issues.

Although much of the public's attention focuses on the rescue of live animals, marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation is only one aspect of stranding response programs. In fact, most stranding network participants rarely, if ever, care for live stranded animals. Of more than 100 letterholders within the United States, only 42 facilities are equipped to respond to and rehabilitate live stranded animals, while 63 letterholders recover carcasses and perform necropsies on dead stranded animals.

Virtually all successful rehabilitations have been seals and sea lions. For example, in 1998 1,168 seals and sea lions were successfully rehabilitated. This number is somewhat above the annual average because the El Niño weather phenomenon caused a higher incidence of strandings. The species of rehabilitated animals were as follows: 757 California sea lions; 217 northern elephant seals; 114 harbor seals; 32 harp seals; 23 gray seals; 18 hooded seals; 4 northern fur seals; 2 Guadalupe fur seals; and 1 ringed seal. With the exception of the two Guadalupe fur seals and possibly the animals from the southern stock of northern fur seals, the rehabilitated seals and sea lions were from healthy stocks.

By contrast, successful rehabilitation of whales and dolphins is very difficult and is still considered a rarity. In 1998, only four rough-toothed dolphins, one bottlenose dolphin, and one gray whale calf were successfully rehabilitated. Since the initial passage of the MMPA in 1972, fewer than 100 whales and dolphins have been successfully rehabilitated. One possible explanation for this difficulty is that when whales or dolphins strand, they are normally in critical condition, and the act of stranding itself causes physiological damage which complicates even the best rehabilitation efforts. Figures from our Southeast Region demonstrate how difficult such a whale and dolphin rehabilitation can be. Last year, there were 113 live whale and dolphin strandings. Of these, 87 died on site or during transport before they ever reached a rehabilitation facility, 11 whales and dolphins were euthanized, and 14 were returned to the water on site after initial examination.

Contributions to Management and Science by Stranding Networks

The contributions of stranding networks to marine mammal science, conservation, and management have been significant and continue to grow as closer partnerships are forged among stranding centers, scientists, and managers. In the last decade alone, network participants have responded to over 30,000 marine mammal strandings (the majority of which were animals that were dead or died soon after stranding) and have collected data critical to our understanding of marine mammal biology, life history, and ecology, as well as information on the natural and anthropogenic threats to marine mammals.

Under the MMPA, NMFS is mandated to recover all marine mammal stocks to a point at which they compose a healthy and functioning component of their ecosystem. As a part of this mandate, one of NMFS' primary responsibilities is to obtain baseline health and information on the status of these stocks including their health, life history, diet, stock structure, reproductive biology, growth rate of the population, and causes and rates of mortality. All programs and activities that NMFS carries out on behalf of marine mammals, including support and oversight of the stranding networks, are done with this mandate in mind. NMFS uses information collected by the stranding networks to monitor and assess threats to marine mammals such as

harmful algal blooms, diseases, ship strikes and fishery interactions. Necropsy (autopsy-like examination of an animal) of a dead marine mammal can provide scientists and managers with a great deal of information about that animal's life, which can be used to build our knowledge of important biological and ecological facts at a population level. In addition, stranding networks have been instrumental in the discovery of diseases such as viruses and bacterial infections that may threaten a number of marine mammal populations.

For example, NMFS recently worked with the many individuals and institutions that comprise the stranding network, the National Ocean Service, and others to identify a harmful algal bloom that caused the death of numerous sea lions in California. Through this collaborative effort, we increased our ability to detect and understand the impacts of biotoxins on marine mammals and their prey species.

In addition to natural causes of mortality, it is critical to document anthropogenic sources of mortality, so that we can work to reduce them. Man-made sources include direct causes such as fishery interactions and indirect causes such as pollution. Stranding networks have been helpful in identifying specific details of such sources. For example, the stranding network alerted NMFS to a problem in the Mid-Atlantic region involving the interaction of coastal gillnet fisheries and harbor porpoises. This information is crucial in developing management and observer programs. Stranding networks have played a central role in identifying ship strikes as one of the major contributors to right whale mortalities over the past two decades. On several occasions, network participants spent 3-5 days carefully necropsying stranded large whales to determine cause of death and, in some cases, verifying ship strikes. Their work led to significant management actions to decrease the number of right whales hit by ships.

Stranded marine mammals also can provide information about less conspicuous, but significant causes of mortality. Specifically, NMFS collaborates with scientists and stranding networks to study the incidence and consequences of disease in marine mammals and the impairment of species recovery by man-made chemical contaminants, such as persistent organic pollutants. In recent decades, studies of over 15,000 individual marine mammals have shown that chemical contaminant exposure in these species is pervasive, global in nature, and that these animals may accumulate extraordinarily high levels of contaminants such as PCBs and DDTs in their fat reserves. Stranding network data collection offers a method to monitor these pollutant levels and determine their effects on survival, reproductive function and recovery of marine mammal populations.

Funding for the Stranding Network

Each year since 1992, NMFS has allocated $50,000 of the protected species budget to assist stranding network participants by purchasing equipment and supplies. NMFS also supports stranding networks by hosting annual national, regional or local training workshops at which participants can improve their stranding response and data collection skills. These gatherings serve as opportunities for stranding network participants to come

together with colleagues and marine mammal experts from around the country in an open exchange of ideas and information.

In addition to these workshops, NMFS has funded and/or published several guidance and informational documents on stranding techniques and topics, including an internationally recognized field guide to marine mammal strandings. Because of its usefulness and worldwide demand, this particular field guide was recently published in CD-ROM format, and free copies were distributed to LOA holders nationwide.

Like all volunteer programs, attaining funding is a daunting task for stranding network participants. Fortunately, public support for the rescue and release of live stranding marine mammals is substantial, and as a result, most stranding facilities are able to rely on private donations for their operating costs in rehabilitating live marine mammals. In contrast, stranding network facilities that primarily respond to dead animals have a much more difficult time raising money and often rely on grants from research organizations to offset the costs for stranding response.

Consideration of the Bill

H.R. 1934 would amend Title IV of the MMPA to require the Department of Commerce to establish and conduct a new grant program to provide funds to eligible stranding centers and stranding network participants for the recovery or treatment of marine mammals, the collection of health information relating to marine mammals, and the operation of facilities for those purposes. This bill requires stranding centers and participants to provide 25% in non-Federal matching funds, and the total grant amount cannot exceed $100,000.

While there are many far-reaching aspects of the stranding program that NMFS recognizes as worthy, we are concerned that the bill could be interpreted to emphasize funding for live marine mammal rehabilitation, only one component of stranding network activities. Although rehabilitation of live marine mammals is of great humane and public education value, NMFS believes that the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program should continue to address marine mammal population assessment and recovery as priority issues and must continue to build baseline health data through cooperation and partnership with stranding networks and other organizations. While the Administration appreciates the intent of this legislation, we are required to balance competing funding priorities, including other high priority mandates in the MMPA and, therefore, we believe it would

be more appropriate to address the issues contained in this bill within the context of MMPA reauthorization.

That concludes my testimony, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to respond to any questions that members of the subcommittee may have.

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