purposes and policies set forth in section 2 of the ESA.

Documents may be reviewed at: all of the following locations for File No. 14245, the Southwest Region for File No. 1596–03, and the Southeast Region for File No. 14726–01:

Permits, Conservation and Education Division, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, 1315 East-West Highway, Room 13705, Silver Spring, MD 20910; phone (301)713–2289; fax (301)713–0376;

Northwest Region, NMFS, 7600 Sand Point Way NE, BIN C15700, Bldg. 1, Seattle, WA 98115–0700; phone (206)526–6150; fax (206)526–6426;

Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802–1668; phone (907)586–7221; fax (907)586–7249;

Southwest Region, NMFS, 501 West Ocean Blvd., Suite 4200, Long Beach, CA 90802–4213; phone (562)980–4001; fax (562)980–4018;

Pacific Islands Region, NMFS, 1601 Kapiolani Blvd., Rm 1110, Honolulu, HI 96814–4700; phone (808)944–2200; fax (808)973–2941;

Northeast Region, NMFS, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930; phone (978)281–9328; fax (978) 281–9394; and

Southeast Region, NMFS, 263 13th Avenue South, Saint Petersburg, Florida 33701; phone (727)824–5312; fax (727)824–5309.

Dated: May 19, 2011.

P. Michael Payne,

Chief, Permits, Conservation and Education Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service.

[FR Doc. 2011–12999 Filed 5–24–11; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RIN 0648–XA201

Takes of Marine Mammals Incidental to Specified Activities; Seabird and Pinniped Research Activities in Central California, 2011–2012

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice; proposed incidental harassment authorization; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS has received an application from PRBO Conservation Science (PRBO), for an Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) to take marine mammals, by harassment, incidental to conducting proposed seabird and pinniped research activities on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, and Point Reyes National Seashore in central California. Pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), NMFS is requesting comments on its proposal to issue an IHA to PRBO to incidentally harass, by Level B harassment only, four species of marine mammals during the specified activity from July, 2011 through June, 2012.

DATES: Comments and information must be received no later than June 24, 2011.

ADDRESSES: Comments on the application should be addressed to P. Michael Payne, Chief, Permits, Conservation and Education Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries Service, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. The mailbox address for providing e-mail comments is *ITP.Cody@noaa.gov.* NMFS is not responsible for e-mail comments send to addresses other than the one provided here. Comments sent via e-mail, including all attachments, must not exceed a 10-megabyte file size.

All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted to *http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental.htm#applications* without change. All Personal Identifying Information (for example, name, address, *etc.*) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information.

A copy of the application containing a list of the references used in this document may be obtained by writing to the above address, telephoning the contact listed here (see **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**) or visiting the Internet at: *http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental.htm#applications*. Documents cited in this notice may be viewed, by appointment, during regular business hours, at the aforementioned address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Jeannine Cody, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS (301) 713–2289, ext. 113.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1371 (a)(5)(D)) directs the Secretary of Commerce to authorize, upon request, the incidental, but not intentional, taking of small numbers of marine mammals of a species or population stock, by United States citizens who engage in a specified activity (other than commercial fishing) within a specified geographical region if certain findings are made and, if the taking is limited to harassment, a notice of a proposed authorization is provided to the public for review.

Authorization for the incidental taking of small numbers of marine mammals 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 subsistence uses (where relevant). The authorization must set forth the permissible methods of taking, other means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on the species or stock and its habitat, and requirements pertaining to the mitigation, monitoring and reporting of such takings. NMFS has defined "negligible impact" in 50 CFR 216.103 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."

Section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA established an expedited process by which citizens of the United States can apply for an authorization to incidentally take small numbers of marine mammals by harassment. Section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA establishes a 45-day time limit for NMFS' review of an application followed by a 30-day public notice and comment period on any proposed authorizations for the incidental harassment of small numbers of marine mammals. Within 45 days of the close of the public comment period, NMFS must either issue or deny the authorization.

Except with respect to certain activities not pertinent here, 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].

Summary of Request

NMFS received an application on January 10, 2011, from PRBO requesting the taking by harassment, of small numbers of marine mammals, incidental to conducting seabird and pinniped research activities on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, and Point Reyes National Seashore in central California (CA). PRBO, along with partners Oikonos Ecosystem Knowledge

and Point Reyes National Seashore, plan to conduct the proposed activities for one year. NMFS reviewed PRBO's application and identified a number of issues requiring further clarification. After addressing comments from NMFS, PRBO modified its application and submitted a revised application on February 23, 2011. NMFS determined that application complete and adequate on April 18, 2011.

PRBO's proposed research activities involve monitoring and censusing seabird colonies; observing seabird nesting habitat; restoring nesting burrows; observing breeding elephant seals, and resupplying a field station. The proposed activities would occur in the vicinity of pinniped haul out sites located on Southeast Farallon Island (37°41′54.32″ N, 123°0′8.33″ W), Año Nuevo Island (37°6′29.25″ N, 122°20′12.20″ W), or within Point Reyes National Seashore (37°59′38.61″ N, 122°58′24.90″ W) in Central CA.

Acoustic and visual stimuli generated by: (1) Noise generated by motorboat approaches and departures; (2) noise generated during restoration activities and loading operations while resupplying the field station; and (3) human presence during seabird and pinniped research activities, may have the potential to cause California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*), Pacific harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*), northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*), and Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*) hauled out on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, or Point Reyes National Seashore to flush into the surrounding water or to cause a short-term behavioral disturbance for marine mammals in the proposed areas. These types of disturbances are the principal means of marine mammal taking associated with these activities and PRBO has requested an authorization to take 5,104 California sea lions, 526 harbor seals, 190 northern elephant seals, and 20 Steller sea lions (*Eumetopias jubatus*) by Level B harassment only.

To date, NMFS has issued three 1-year IHAs to PRBO for the conduct of the same activities from 2007 to 2010. This is PRBO's fourth request for an IHA and the monitoring results from the 2008–2009 IHA appear in the Proposed Monitoring section of this notice.

Description of the Specified Geographic Region

The proposed action area consists of the following three locations in the northeast Pacific Ocean:

South Farallon Islands

The South Farallon Islands (SFI) consist of Southeast Farallon Island (SEFI) located at 37°41′54.32″ N, 123°0′8.33″ W and West End Island (WEI). These two islands are directly adjacent to each other and separated by only a 30-foot (ft) (9.1 meter (m)) channel. The SFI have a land area of approximately 120 acres (0.49 square kilometers (km)) and are part of the Farallon National Wildlife Refuge. The islands are located near the edge of the continental shelf 28 miles (mi) (45.1 km) west of San Francisco, CA, and lie within the waters of the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary (NMS).

Año Nuevo Island

Año Nuevo Island (ANI) located at 37°6′29.25″ N, 122°20′12.20″ W is one-quarter mile (402 m) offshore of Año Nuevo Point in San Mateo County, CA. This small 25-acre (0.1 square km) island is part of the Año Nuevo State Reserve, all of which is owned and operated by California State Parks. ANI lies within the Monterey Bay NMS and the newly established Año Nuevo State Marine Conservation Area.

Point Reyes National Seashore

Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS) located is approximately 40 miles (64.3 km) north of San Francisco Bay and also lies within the Gulf of the Farallones NMS. The proposed research areas (Life Boat Station, Drakes Beach, and Point Bonita) are within the headland coastal areas of the national park.

Description of the Specified Activity

Seabird Research on SEFI

PRBO proposes to conduct: (1) Daily observations of seabird colonies at a maximum frequency of three 15-minute (min) visits per day; and (2) conduct daily observations of breeding common murres (*Uria aalge*) at a maximum frequency of one 5-hour visit per day between July, 2011 and June, 2012. These activities usually involve one or two observers conducting daily censuses of seabirds or conducting mark/recapture studies of breeding seabirds on SEFI. The researchers plan to access the island's two landing areas, the North Landing and the East Landing, by 14 to 18 ft (4.3 to 5.5 m) open motorboats which are hoisted onto the island using a derrick system and then travel by foot to coastal areas of the island to view breeding seabirds from behind an observation blind.

The potential for incidental take related to the mark/recapture studies is very low as these activities are conducted within the interior of the island away from the intertidal areas where the pinnipeds haul out. Most potential for incidental take would occur when the researchers approach or depart the intertidal area by motorboat or when the researchers walk within 50 ft (15.2 m) of the haulout areas to enter the observation blinds to observe shorebirds.

Field Station Resupply on SEFI

PRBO proposes to resupply the field station once every two weeks at a maximum frequency of 26 visits. Resupply activities involve personnel approaching either the North Landing or East Landing by motorboat. At East Landing—the primary landing site—all personnel assisting with the landing would stay on the loading platform approximately 30 ft (9.1 m) above the water. At North Landing, loading operations would occur at the water level in the intertidal areas. Most potential for incidental take would occur when the researchers approach the area by motorboat or when the researchers load or unload supplies onshore.

Seabird Research on Año Nuevo Island (ANI)

PRBO, in collaboration with Oikonos—Ecosystem Knowledge, proposes to monitor seabird burrow nesting habitat quality and to conduct habitat restoration at a maximum frequency of 20 visits per year. This activity involves two to three researchers accessing the north side of the island by a 12 ft (3.7 m) Zodiac boat. Once onshore, the researchers will check subterranean nest boxes and restore any nesting habitat for approximately 15 min.

Most potential for incidental take would occur at the landing beach on the north side of the island when the researchers arrive and depart to check the boxes. Non-breeding pinnipeds may occasionally be present, including California sea lions that may be hauled out near a small group of subterranean seabird nest boxes on the island terrace. In both locations researchers are located more than 50 ft (15.2 m) away from any pinnipeds which may be hauled out.

Seabird Research on Point Reyes National Seashore (PRNS)

The National Park Service in collaboration with PRBO monitors seabird breeding and roosting colonies; conducts habitat restoration; removes non-native plants; monitors intertidal areas; maintains coastal dune habitat. Seabird monitoring usually involves one or two observers conducting the survey

by small boats (12 to 22 ft; 3.6 to 6.7 m) along the PRNS shoreline. Researchers would visit the site at a maximum frequency of 20 times per year, with an emphasis on increasing monitoring during the nesting season. Researchers would conduct occasional, intermittent visits during the rest of the year.

A majority of the research occurs in areas where marine mammals are not present. However, the potential for incidental harassment will occur at the landing beaches along Point Reyes Headland, boat ramps, or parking lots where northern elephant seals, harbor seals, or California sea lions may be hauled out in the vicinity.

Pinniped Research on West End Island (WEI)

Pinniped research activities involve surveying breeding northern elephant seals on WEI between early December and late February. At least three researchers would visit the site at a maximum frequency of five times per year. To conduct the census, the researchers would travel by foot approximately 1,500 ft (457.2 m) above the site to conduct the census. Historically, a few juvenile Steller sea lions may haul out on a spit of rocks called Shell Beach Rocks below the transit path to the northern elephant seal haul out. Thus, the potential for incidental harassment of Steller sea lions may occur when the researchers transit above Shell Beach Rocks.

NMFS expects that acoustic and visual stimuli resulting from the proposed motorboat operations and human presence has the potential to harass marine mammals, incidental to the conduct of the proposed activities. NMFS expects these disturbances to be temporary and result, at worst, in a temporary modification in behavior and/or low-level physiological effects (Level B Harassment) of small numbers of certain species of marine mammals.

Description of the Marine Mammals in the Area of the Proposed Specified Activity

The marine mammals most likely to be harassed incidental to conducting seabird and pinniped research at the proposed research areas on SEFI, ANI, and PRNS are primarily California sea lions, northern elephant seals, Pacific harbor seals, and to a lesser extent the eastern distinct population of the Steller sea lion which is listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*)

General information of these species can be found in Caretta *et al.,* (2010) and Allen and Angliss (2010) and is available at the following URLs: *http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/po2010_draft.pdf* and *http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/pdfs/sars/ak2010_draft.pdf* respectively. Refer to these documents for information on these species. Additional information on these species is presented below this section.

Northern Elephant Seal

Northern elephant seals are not listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, nor are they categorized as depleted under the MMPA. The northern elephant 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.

Populations of northern elephant seals in the U.S. and Mexico were all originally derived from a few tens or a few hundreds of individuals surviving in Mexico after being nearly hunted to extinction (Stewart *et al.,* 1994). Given the very recent derivation of most rookeries, no genetic differentiation would be expected. Although movement and genetic exchange continues between rookeries, most elephant seals return to their natal rookeries when they start breeding (Huber *et al.,* 1991). The California breeding population is now demographically isolated from the Baja California population. No international agreements exist for the joint management of this species by the U.S. and Mexico. The California breeding population is considered to be a separate stock (Caretta *et al.,* 2010).

A complete population count of elephant seals is not possible because all age classes are not ashore at the same time. Elephant seal population size is typically estimated by counting the number of pups produced and multiplying by the inverse of the expected ratio of pups to total animals (McCann, 1985). Stewart *et al.,* (1994) used McCann's multiplier of 4.5 to extrapolate from 28,164 pups to a population estimate of 127,000 elephant seals in the U.S. and Mexico in 1991. The multiplier of 4.5 was based on a non-growing population. Boveng (1988) and Barlow *et al.* (1993) suggest that a multiplier of 3.5 is more appropriate for a rapidly growing population such as the California stock of elephant seals. Based on the estimated 35,549 pups born in California in 2005 and this 3.5 multiplier, the California stock was approximately 124,000 in 2005.

At Point Reyes, the population grew at 32.8 percent per year between 1988 and 1997 (Sydeman and Allen, 1999) and around 10 percent per year since 2000 (S. Allen, unpubl. data), and in 2006 around 700 pups were born at three primary breeding areas. The population on the Farallon Islands has declined by 3.4 percent per year since 1983, and in recent years numbers have fluctuated between 100 and 200 pups (W. Sydeman, D. Lee, unpubl. data). Observers first sighted elephant seals on Año Nuevo Island in 1955 and today the population ranges from 900 to 1,000 adults (M. Lowry, unpubl. data).

Elephant seals congregate in central California to breed from late November to March. Females typically give birth to a single pup and attend the pup for up to six weeks. Breeding occurs after the pup is weaned by attending males. After breeding, seals migrate to the Gulf of Alaska or deeper waters in the eastern Pacific. Adult females and juveniles return to terrestrial colonies to molt in April and May, and males return in June and July to molt, remaining onshore for around three weeks.

California Sea Lion

California sea lions are not listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, nor are they categorized as depleted under the MMPA. The California sea lion includes three subspecies: *Z. c. wollebaeki* (on the Galapagos Islands), *Z. c. japonicus* (in Japan, but now thought to be extinct), and *Z. c. californianus* (found from southern Mexico to southwestern Canada; herein referred to as the California sea lion). The subspecies is comprised of three stocks: (1) The U.S. stock, beginning at the U.S./Mexico border extending northward into Canada; (2) the western Baja California stock, extending from the U.S./Mexico border to the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula; and (3) the Gulf of California stock, which includes the Gulf of California from the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula and across to the mainland and extends to southern Mexico (Lowry *et al.,* 1992).

In 2009, the estimated population of the U.S. stock of California sea lion ranged from 141,842 to 238,000 animals and the maximum population growth rate was 6.52 percent when pup counts from El Niño years (1983, 1984, 1992, 1993, 1998, and 2003) were removed (Carretta *et al.,* 2010).

Major rookeries for the California sea lion exist on the Channel Islands off southern California and on the islands situated along the east and west coasts of Baja California. Males are polygamous, establishing breeding territories that may include up to fourteen females. They defend their territories with aggressive physical displays and vocalization. Sea lions reach sexual maturity at four to five

years old and the breeding season lasts from May to August. Most pups are born from May through July and weaned at 10 months old.

The U.S. stock of California sea lion is the only stock present in the proposed research area and in recent years, California sea lions have begun to breed annually in small numbers at Southeast Farallon and Año Nuevo Islands.

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 Año Nuevo Island, California sea lions may haul out at one of eight beach areas on the perimeter of the island (see Figure 2 in the Application). The island's average population ranges from 4,000 to 9,500 animals (M. Lowry, unpublished data).

Pacific Harbor Seal

Pacific harbor seals are not listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, nor are they categorized as depleted under the MMPA. The animals inhabit near-shore coastal and estuarine areas from Baja California, Mexico, to the Pribilof Islands in Alaska. Pacific harbor seals are divided into two subspecies: *P. v. stejnegeri* in the western North Pacific, near Japan, and *P. v. richardsi* in the northeast Pacific Ocean. The latter subspecies, recognized as three separate stocks, inhabits the west coast of the continental United States, including: The outer coastal waters of Oregon and Washington states; Washington state inland waters; and Alaska coastal and inland waters. Two of these stocks, the California stock and Oregon/Washington coast stock, of Pacific harbor seals are identified off the coast of Oregon and California for management purposes under the MMPA. However, the stock boundary is difficult to distinguish because of the continuous distribution of harbor seals along the west coast and any rigid boundary line is (to a greater or lesser extent) arbitrary, from a biological perspective (Carretta *et al.*, 2010).

In 2009, the estimated population of the California of Pacific harbor seals ranged from 31,600 to 34,233 animals and the maximum population growth rate was 3.5 percent. The estimated population of the Oregon/Washington coast stocks was 24,732 animals (Carretta *et al.*, 2010).

In California, over 500 harbor seal haulout sites are widely distributed along the mainland and offshore islands, and include rocky shores, beaches and intertidal sandbars (Lowry *et al.*, 2005). On the Farallon Islands, approximately 40 to 120 Pacific harbor seals haul out in the intertidal areas (PRBO 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 Año Nuevo Island, harbor seals may haul out at one of eight beach areas on the perimeter of the island (see Figure 2 in PRBO's Application) and the island's average population ranges from 100 to 150 animals (M. Lowry, unpublished data).

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 hundreds of pups.

Steller Sea Lion

The Steller sea lion eastern stock is listed as threatened under the ESA and is categorized as depleted under the MMPA. Steller sea lions range along the North Pacific Rim from northern Japan to California (Loughlin *et al.*, 1984), with centers of abundance and distribution in the Gulf of Alaska and Aleutian Islands, respectively. Two separate stocks of Steller sea lions were recognized within U.S. waters: An eastern U.S. stock, which includes animals east of Cape Suckling, Alaska (144° W), and a western U.S. stock, which includes animals at and west of Cape Suckling (Loughlin, 1997). The species is not known to migrate, but individuals disperse widely outside of the breeding season (late May through early July), thus potentially intermixing with animals from other areas.

In 2008, the estimated population of the eastern U.S. stock ranged from 44,404 to 55,832 animals and the maximum population growth rate was 3.1 percent (Angliss and Allen, 2010).

The eastern U.S. stock of Steller sea lions breeds on rookeries located in southeast Alaska, British Columbia, Oregon, and California; there are no rookeries located in Washington state. Counts of pups on rookeries conducted near the end of the birthing season are nearly complete counts of pup production.

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 (NMFS 1995, Trujillo *et al.*, 2004, Hoffman *et al.*, 2006). A 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 (Pitcher *et al.*, 2007).

The current population of eastern Steller sea lions in the proposed research area is estimated to number between 50 and 750 animals. The PRBO estimates that between 50 and 150 Steller sea lions live on the Farallon Islands, and the NMFS Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC) estimates between 400 and 600 live on ANI (PRBO unpublished data, 2008; SWFSC unpublished data, 2008).

On SEFI, the abundance of females declined an average of 3.6 percent per year from 1974 to 1997 (Sydeman and Allen, 1999). Pup counts at ANI declined 5 percent annually through the 1990s (NOAA Stock Assessment, 2003), and have apparently stabilized between 2001 and 2005 (M. Lowry, SWFSC unpublished data).

In 2000, the combined pup estimate for both islands was 349. In 2005, the pup estimate was 204 on ANI. Pup counts on the Farallon Islands have generally varied from five to 15 (Hastings and Sydeman, 2002; PRBO unpublished data). Pups have not been born at Point Reyes Headland since the 1970s and Steller sea lions are seen in very low numbers there currently (S. Allen, unpubl. data).

Steller sea lions give birth in May through July and breeding commences a couple of weeks after birth. Pups are weaned during the winter and spring of the following year.

Other Marine Mammals in the Proposed Action Area

California (southern) sea otters (*Enhydra lutris nereis*), listed as threatened under the ESA and categorized as depleted under the MMPA, usually range in coastal waters within two km of shore. PRBO has not encountered California sea otters on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, or Point Reyes National Seashore during the course of seabird or pinniped research activities over the past three years. This species is managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is not considered further in this proposed IHA notice.

Potential Effects on Marine Mammals

Acoustic and visual stimuli generated by: (1) Motorboat operations; and (2) the

appearance of researchers may have the potential to cause Level B harassment of any pinnipeds hauled out on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, or Point Reyes National Seashore. The effects of sounds from motorboat operations and the appearance of researchers might include hearing impairment or behavioral disturbance (Southall, *et al.*, 2007).

Hearing Impairment

Marine mammals produce sounds in various important contexts—social interactions, foraging, navigating, and to responding to predators. The best available science suggests that pinnipeds have a functional aerial hearing sensitivity between 75 hertz (Hz) and 75 kilohertz (kHz) and can produce a diversity of sounds, though generally from 100 Hz to several tens of kHz (Southall, *et al.*, 2007).

Exposure to high intensity sound for a sufficient duration may result in auditory effects such as a noise-induced threshold shift—an increase in the auditory threshold after exposure to noise (Finneran, Carder, Schlundt, and Ridgway, 2005). Factors that influence the amount of threshold shift include the amplitude, duration, frequency content, temporal pattern, and energy distribution of noise exposure. The magnitude of hearing threshold shift normally decreases over time following cessation of the noise exposure. The amount of threshold shift just after exposure is called the initial threshold shift. If the threshold shift eventually returns to zero (i.e., the threshold returns to the pre-exposure value), it is called temporary threshold shift (TTS) (Southall *et al.*, 2007).

Pinnipeds have the potential to be disturbed by airborne and underwater noise generated by the small boats equipped with outboard engines (Richardson, Greene, Malme, and Thomson, 1995). However, there is a dearth of information on acoustic effects of motorboats on pinniped hearing and communication and to NMFS' knowledge; there has been no specific documentation of hearing impairment in free-ranging pinnipeds exposed to small motorboats during realistic field conditions.

Behavioral Disturbance

Disturbances resulting from human activity can impact short- and long-term pinniped haul out behavior (Renouf *et al.*, 1981; Schneider and Payne, 1983; Terhune and Almon, 1983; Allen *et al.*, 1984; Stewart, 1984; Suryan and Harvey, 1999; Mortenson *et al.*, 2000; and Kucey and Trites, 2006). Disturbance includes a variety of effects, including subtle to conspicuous changes in behavior, movement, and displacement. Reactions to sound, if any, depend on species, state of maturity, experience, current activity, reproductive state, time of day, and many other factors (Richardson *et al.*, 1995; Wartzok *et al.*, 2004; Southall *et al.*, 2007; Weilgart, 2007). However, if a sound source 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.*, 1984; Calambokidis *et al.*, 1991; Suryan and Harvey, 1999; and Mortenson *et al.*, 2000). The Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*) has been shown to avoid beaches that have been disturbed often by humans (Kenyon, 1972). And 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).

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 haulout behavior in Métis 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-canoes which approach slowly, quietly and low on 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 has only a temporary effect on the haulout behavior of harbor seals in the Métis Bay area.

In 2004, Johnson and Acevedo-Gutierrez (2007) evaluated the efficacy of buffer zones for watercraft around harbor seal haulout sites on Yellow Island, Washington state. 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 seven-weekend study, the authors recorded 14 human-related disturbances which 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) 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 haulout site in less than or equal to 60 min. Seal numbers did not return to pre-disturbance levels within 180 min. 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 re: 20 μPa) non-pulse sounds often leave haulout areas and seek refuge temporarily (minutes to a few hours) in the water (Southall *et al.*, 2007). Based on the available data, previous monitoring reports from PRBO, and studies described here, any pinnipeds found in the vicinity of the proposed project are only anticipated to have short-term behavioral reactions to the noise attributed to PRBO's motorboat operations and human presence related to the seabird and pinniped research. NMFS would expect the pinnipeds to return to a haulout site within 60 min. of the disturbance (Allen *et al.*, 1985). The effects to pinnipeds appear at the most, to displace the animals temporarily from their haul out sites and NMFS does not expect that the pinnipeds would permanently abandon a haul-out site during the conduct of the proposed research. The maximum disturbance to Steller sea lions would result in the animals flushing into the water in response to presence of the researchers.

Finally, no research activities would occur on pinniped rookeries and breeding animals are concentrated in areas where researchers would not visit. Therefore, NMFS does not expect mother and pup separation or crushing of pups to occur.

The potential effects to marine mammals described in this section of the document do not take into consideration the proposed monitoring and mitigation measures described later

in this document (see the "Proposed Mitigation" and "Proposed Monitoring and Reporting" sections) which, as noted, are designed to effect the least practicable adverse impact on affected marine mammal species and stocks.

Anticipated Effects on Habitat

NMFS does not anticipate that the proposed operations would result in any temporary or permanent effects on the habitats used by the marine mammals in the proposed area, including the food sources they use (*i.e.*. fish and invertebrates). NMFS does not anticipate that there would be any physical damage to any habitat. While NMFS anticipates that the specified activity may result in marine mammals avoiding certain areas due to temporary ensonification and human presence, this impact to habitat is temporary and reversible which NMFS considered in further detail earlier in this document, as behavioral modification.

Proposed Mitigation

In order to issue an incidental take authorization (ITA) under Section 101(a)(5)(D) of the MMPA, NMFS must set forth the permissible methods of taking pursuant to such activity, and other means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on such species or stock and its habitat, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance, and the availability of such species or stock for taking for certain subsistence uses.

PRBO has based the mitigation measures described herein, to be implemented for the proposed seabird and pinniped research activities, on the following: (1) Protocols used during previous PRBO seabird and pinniped research activities as approved by NMFS; (2) recommended best practices in Richardson *et al.* (1995); (3) the Terms and Conditions of Scientific Research Permit 373–1868–00; and (4) the Terms and Conditions listed in the Incidental Take Statement for NMFS' 2008 Biological Opinion for these activities.

To reduce the potential for disturbance from acoustic and visual stimuli associated with the activities PRBO and/or its designees has proposed to implement the following mitigation measures for marine mammals:

(1) Abide by all of the Terms and Conditions listed in the Incidental Take Statement for NMFS' 2008 Biological Opinion, including: Monitoring for offshore predators and reporting on observed behaviors of Steller sea lions in relation to the disturbance.

(2) Abide by the Terms and Conditions of Scientific Research Permit 373–1868–00.

(3) Postpone beach landings on Año Nuevo Island until pinnipeds that may be present on the beach have slowly entered the water.

(4) Select a pathway of approach to research sites that minimizes the number of marine mammals harassed, with the first priority being avoiding the disturbance of Steller sea lions at haul-outs.

(5) Avoid visits to sites used by pinnipeds for pupping.

(6) Monitor for offshore predators and not approach hauled out Steller sea lions or other pinnipeds if great white sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*) or killer whales (*Orcinas orca*) are seen in the area. If predators are seen, eastern U.S. stock Steller sea lions or any other pinniped must not be disturbed until the area is free of predators.

(7) Keep voices hushed and bodies low to the ground in the visual presence of pinnipeds.

(8) Conduct seabird observations at North Landing on Southeast Farallon Island in an observation blind, shielded from the view of hauled out pinnipeds.

(9) Crawl slowly to access seabird nest boxes on Año Nuevo Island if pinnipeds are within view.

(10) Coordinate research visits to intertidal areas of Southeast Farallon Island (to reduce potential take) and to coordinate research goals for Año Nuevo Island to minimize the number of trips to the island.

(11) Coordinate monitoring schedules on Año Nuevo Island, so that areas near any pinnipeds would be accessed only once per visit.

(12) Have the lead biologist serve as an observer to evaluate incidental take.

NMFS has carefully evaluated the applicant's proposed mitigation measures and has considered a range of other measures in the context of ensuring that NMFS prescribes the means of effecting the least practicable adverse impact on the affected marine mammal species and stocks and their habitat. Our evaluation of potential measures included consideration of the following factors in relation to one another: (i) The manner in which, and the degree to which, the successful implementation of the measure is expected to minimize adverse impacts to marine mammals; (ii) the proven or likely efficacy of the specific measure to minimize adverse impacts as planned; and (iii) the practicability of the measure for applicant implementation.

Based on our evaluation of the applicant's proposed measures, as well as other measures considered by NMFS or recommended by the public, NMFS has preliminarily determined that the proposed mitigation measures provide the means of effecting the least practicable adverse impacts on marine mammals species or stocks and their habitat, paying particular attention to rookeries, mating grounds, and areas of similar significance.

Proposed Monitoring

Summary of Previous Monitoring

PRBO has complied with the mitigation and monitoring required under the previous authorization for the 2008–2009 seasons. In compliance with the 2008–2009 IHA, PRBO submitted a final report on their activities covering the period of December 12, 2008 through December 11, 2009. During the effective dates of the 2008–2009 IHA, PRBO conducted seabird and pinniped research activities on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, and Point Reyes National Seashore. PRBO recorded the following behaviors (*i.e.*, alert, moved greater than one meter, or flushed to the water) of marine mammals during the course of the IHA. The total number of potentially harassed California sea lions (991); northern elephant seals (102); harbor seals (93); and Steller sea lions (10) during the conduct of the research activities were, respectively, 67, 78, 62, and 52 percent lower than what NMFS authorized in the IHA. These results support NMFS' original findings that the mitigation measures set forth in the 2008–2009 IHA effected the least practicable adverse impact on the species or stock.

PRBO will submit an annual monitoring report for the 2010–2011 IHA (effective dates, February 19, 2010 through February 18, 2011) by May 19, 2011. Upon receipt, NMFS will post this annual report on the same Internet address.

In order to issue an ITA 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 IHAs 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 in the action area.

As part of its 2011 application for an IHA, PRBO provided a proposed monitoring plan for assessing impacts to seals and sea lions from the research

activities. The PRBO researchers will monitor the area for pinnipeds during all research activities. Monitoring activities will consist of conducting and recording observations on pinnipeds within the vicinity of the proposed research areas. The monitoring notes would provide dates, location, species, the researcher's activity, behavioral state, numbers of animals that were alert or moved greater than one meter, and numbers of pinnipeds that flushed into the water.

Proposed Reporting

The PRBO will submit a final monitoring report to the NMFS Director of the Office of Protected Resources no later than 90 days after the expiration of the Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA), if it is issued. The final report will describe the operations that were conducted and sightings of marine mammals near the proposed project. The report will provide full documentation of methods, results, and interpretation pertaining to all monitoring. The final report will provide:

(i) A summary and table of the dates, times, and weather during all seabird and pinniped research activities.

(ii) Species, number, location, and behavior of any marine mammals, observed throughout all monitoring activities.

(iii) An estimate of the number (by species) of marine mammals that are known to have been exposed to acoustic or visual stimuli associated with the seabird and pinniped research activities.

(iv) A description of the implementation and effectiveness of the monitoring and mitigation measures of the IHA and full documentation of methods, results, and interpretation pertaining to all monitoring.

PRBO will report all injured and dead marine mammals (regardless of cause) to NMFS as soon as practicable. The report should include the species or description of the animal, the condition of the animal, location, time first found, observed behaviors (if alive) and photo or video if available.

In the unanticipated event that PRBO's activities cause any taking of a marine mammal in a manner prohibited by the IHA, if issued, such as an injury (Level A harassment), serious injury or mortality, PRBO shall postpone the authorized activities and immediately report the incident to the Chief of the Permits, Conservation, and Education Division, Office of Protected Resources and shall submit an incident report to NMFS. The report must include the following information: Time, date, and location (latitude/longitude) of the incident; the name and type of vessel involved; the vessel's speed during the incident; description of the incident; water depth; environmental conditions (*e.g.* wind speed and direction, sea state, cloud cover, and visibility); species identification or description of the animal; the fate of the animal; and photographs or video footage of the animal (if equipment is available). Activities shall not resume until NMFS is able to review the circumstances of the prohibited take. NMFS shall work with PRBO to determine whether modifications in the activities are appropriate and necessary. PRBO may not resume their activities until notified by NMFS in writing via a letter or an email or via the telephone.

Estimated Take by Incidental Harassment

Except with respect to certain activities not pertinent here, 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].

Only take by Level B harassment is anticipated and authorized as a result of the proposed seabird and pinniped research activities on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, and Point Reyes National Seashore.

Based on PRBO's previous research experiences, with the same activities conducted in the proposed research area, and on marine mammal research activities in these areas, NMFS estimates that approximately 5,104 California sea lions, 526 harbor seals, 190 northern elephant seals, and 20 Steller sea lions could be potentially affected by Level B behavioral harassment over the course of the proposed IHA. NMFS calculated the take estimates by multiplying three components: (1) The maximum number of animals that could be present; (2) the maximum number of disturbances; and (3) the estimated number of days that an animal could be present in the proposed area. NMFS derived these estimates from the results of the 2008–2009 monitoring report and anecdotal information from PRBO scientists.

TABLE 1—ESTIMATES OF THE POSSIBLE NUMBERS OF MARINE MAMMALS EXPOSED TO ACOUSTIC AND VISUAL STIMULI DURING PRBO'S PROPOSED SEABIRD AND PINNIPED RESEARCH DURING JULY 2011–JUNE2012

Activity	Maximum estimated number present	Maximum estimated number of disturbances	Estimated number of days with animal presence	Requested number of incidental takes
California sea lions: Requested take = 5,104				
SEFI Daily Observations	27	3	E. Landing—15 N. Landing—22 Other Areas—4	E. Landing—1,215 N. Landing—1,782 Other Areas—324
SEFI Murre Research	26	1	Other Areas—17	Other Areas—442
SEFI Field Station Resupply	31	1	E. Landing—13	E. Landing—403
ANI Seabird Monitoring	68	1	Other Areas—12	Other Areas—816
ANI Intermittent Activities	110	1	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—110
PRNS Seabird Monitoring	3	1	Other Areas—4	Other Areas—12
Harbor seals: Requested take = 526				
SEFI Daily Observations	5	3	E. Landing—4 N. Landing—7 Other Areas—18	E. Landing—60 N. Landing—105 Other Areas—270
SEFI Murre Research	2	1	N. Landing—9	N. Landing—18

TABLE 1—ESTIMATES OF THE POSSIBLE NUMBERS OF MARINE MAMMALS EXPOSED TO ACOUSTIC AND VISUAL STIMULI DURING PRBO'S PROPOSED SEABIRD AND PINNIPED RESEARCH DURING JULY 2011–JUNE2012—Continued

Activity	Maximum estimated number present	Maximum estimated number of disturbances	Estimated number of days with animal presence	Requested number of incidental takes
SEFI Field Station Resupply	12	1	E. Landing—2 N. Landing—2	E. Landing—24 N. Landing—24
ANI Seabird Monitoring	2	1	Other Areas—5	Other Areas—10
PRNS Seabird Monitoring	15	1	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—15
Northern elephant seals: Requested take = 190				
SEFI Daily Observations	2	3	E. Landing—4 N. Landing—7	E. Landing—24 N. Landing—42
SEFI Murre Research	4	1	N. Landing—5	N. Landing—20
SEFI Field Station Resupply	2	1	E. Landing—1	E. Landing—2
ANI Seabird Monitoring	10	1	Other Areas—10	Other Areas—100
PRNS Seabird Monitoring	2	1	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—2
Steller sea lions: Requested take = 20				
SEFI Daily Observations	2	3	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—6
SEFI Murre Research	9	1	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—9
SEFI Field Station Resupply	1	1	E. Landing—1	E. Landing—1
ANI Seabird Monitoring	1	1	Other Areas—2	Other Areas—2
ANI Intermittent Activities	1	1	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—1
PRNS Seabird Monitoring	1	1	Other Areas—1	Other Areas—1

Other Areas: Elephant Seal Colony (SEFI), Sea Lion Cove (SEFI), Landing Cove (ANI), and Drakes Beach (PRNS).

Estimates of the numbers of marine mammals that might be affected are based on consideration of the maximum number of marine mammals that could be disturbed by approximately 1,908 visits to SEFI, ANI, and PRNS during the course of the proposed activity. These incidental harassment numbers represent approximately two percent of the U.S. stock of California sea lion, 1.5 percent of the California stock of Pacific harbor seal, 0.15 percent of the California breeding stock of northern elephant seal, and 0.04 percent of the eastern U.S. stock of Steller sea lion. For each species, these numbers are small relative to the population size.

NMFS expects all of the potential takes to be Level B behavioral harassment only. Because of the required mitigation measures and the likelihood that some pinnipeds will avoid the area, no injury or mortality to pinnipeds is expected or requested.

Negligible Impact and Small Numbers Analysis and Determination

NMFS has defined "negligible impact" in 50 CFR 216.103 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." In making a negligible impact determination, NMFS considers:

(1) The number of anticipated mortalities;

(2) The number and nature of anticipated injuries;

(3) The number, nature, and intensity, and duration of Level B harassment; and

(4) The context in which the takes occur.

As mentioned previously, NMFS estimates that four species of marine mammals could be potentially affected by Level B harassment over the course of the IHA. For each species, these numbers are small (each, less than or equal to two percent) relative to the population size.

NMFS does not anticipate takes by Level A harassment, serious injury, or mortality to occur as a result of PRBO's proposed activities, and none are authorized. These species may exhibit behavioral modifications, including temporarily vacating the area during the proposed seabird and pinniped research activities to avoid the resultant acoustic and visual disturbances. However, NMFS anticipates only short-term behavioral disturbance to occur due to the short and sporadic duration of the research activities, the availability of alternate areas for marine mammals to avoid the resultant acoustic and visual disturbances; and limited access of PRBO researchers to Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, and Point Reyes National Seashore during the pupping season. Due to the nature, degree, and context of the behavioral harassment anticipated, the proposed activities are not expected to impact rates of recruitment or survival.

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 mitigation and monitoring measures, NMFS preliminarily finds that the impact of conducting proposed seabird and pinniped research activities on Southeast Farallon Island, Año Nuevo Island, and Point Reyes National Seashore in central California, July, 2011 through June, 2012, would result in the incidental take of small numbers of marine mammals, by Level B behavioral harassment only, and that the total taking from PRBO's proposed activities would have a negligible impact on the affected species or stocks; and that impacts to affected species or stocks of marine mammals would be mitigated to the lowest level practicable.

Impact on Availability of Affected Species or Stock for Taking for Subsistence Uses

There are no relevant subsistence uses of marine mammals implicated by this action.

Endangered Species Act

The Steller sea lion, eastern U.S. stock is listed as threatened under the ESA and occurs in the research area. NMFS Headquarters' Office of Protected Resources, Permits, Conservation, and

Education Division conducted a formal section 7 consultation under the ESA. On November 18, 2008, NMFS issued a Biological Opinion (2008 BiOp) and concluded that the issuance of an IHA is likely to affect, but not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Steller sea lions. NMFS has also issued an incidental take statement (ITS) for Steller sea lions pursuant to section 7 of the ESA. The ITS contains reasonable and prudent measures for implementing terms and conditions to minimize the effects of this take. NMFS has reviewed the 2008 BiOp and determined that there is no new information regarding effects to Steller sea lions; the action has not been modified in a manner which would cause adverse effects not previously evaluated; there has been no new listing of species or no new designation of critical habitat that could be affected by the action; and the action will not exceed the extent or amount of incidental take authorized in the 2008 BiOp. Therefore, the proposed IHA does not require the reinitiation of Section 7 consultation under the ESA.

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)

To meet NMFS' NEPA requirements for the issuance of an IHA to PRBO, NMFS prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) in 2007 that was specific to seabird research activities on SEFI, WEI, ANI, and PRNS and evaluated the impacts on the human environment of NMFS' authorization of incidental Level B harassment resulting from seabird research in Central California. At that time, NMFS determined that conducting the seabird research would not have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and, therefore, it was not necessary to prepare an environmental impact statement for the issuance of an IHA to PRBO for this activity. In 2008, NMFS prepared a supplemental EA (SEA) titled "Supplemental Environmental Assessment for the Issuance of an Incidental Harassment Authorization to Take Marine Mammals by Harassment Incidental to Conducting Seabird and Pinniped Research in Central California and Environmental Assessment for the Continuation of Scientific Research on Pinnipeds in California Under Scientific Research Permit 373–1868–00," to address new available information regarding the effects of PRBO's seabird and pinniped research activities that may have cumulative impacts to the physical and biological environment. At that time, NMFS concluded that issuance of an IHA for the December 2008 through 2009 season would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment and issued a FONSI for the 2008 SEA regarding PRBO's activities. In conjunction with this year's application, NMFS has again reviewed the 2007 EA and the 2008 SEA and determined that there are no new direct, indirect or cumulative impacts to the human and natural environment associated with the IHA requiring evaluation in a supplemental EA and NMFS, therefore, reaffirms the 2008 FONSI. A copy of the EA, SEA, and the NMFS FONSI for this activity is available upon request (see **ADDRESSES**).

Dated: May 20, 2011.

James H. Lecky,

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

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Department of the Army

Real Property Master Plan Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, at Yuma Proving Ground, Arizona

AGENCY: Department of the Army, DoD.

ACTION: Notice of Intent.

SUMMARY: The Department of the Army intends to prepare a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) to analyze the environmental impacts resulting from adoption and implementation of a Real Property Master Plan (RPMP), including test areas and training activities at Yuma Proving Ground.

ADDRESSES: For questions concerning the RPMP PEIS, please contact Mr. Sergio Obregon, U.S. Army Garrison Yuma Proving Ground, National Environmental Policy Act Coordinator, IMWE–YMA–PWE, 301 C Street, Yuma, AZ 85365–9498. Written comments may be mailed to that address or e-mailed to *ypgnepa@conus.army.mil.*

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mr. Chuck Wullenjohn, Yuma Proving Ground Public Affairs Office, at (928) 328–6189 Monday through Thursday from 6:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Mountain Standard Time.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Yuma Proving Ground consists of approximately 840,000 acres of DoD-managed land in the Sonoran Desert in southwestern Arizona and occupies portions of Yuma and La Paz counties. The mission at Yuma Proving Ground is ensuring the readiness of U. S. forces and materiel to perform in hot arid conditions around the world. This requires rigorous testing of ground and aerial vehicles, weapons, munitions, sensors, and guidance systems and realistic training. The U.S. has been engaged in hostile conflicts in environments similar to those found at Yuma Proving Ground, resulting in a need for increased testing of existing and developing military equipment, vehicles, and munitions under these environmental conditions. To meet these needs, the U.S. Army intends to prepare a RPMP PEIS at Yuma Proving Ground to analyze potential impacts from new construction, changes in testing and training, and activities conducted under private industry partnerships. Renewable energy initiatives will also be discussed in the PEIS, but project-specific NEPA analysis will be required prior to implementing specific renewable energy initiatives.

Alternatives will consist of alternative siting locations for certain activities within Yuma Proving Ground and different magnitudes of implementation with regard to spatial extent of potential impacts and frequency and duration of specific events. The EIS will also analyze the No Action Alternative, under which no new construction would occur and there would be no changes in testing and training activities conducted at Yuma Proving Ground.

No changes are proposed to activities conducted at off-post areas in Arizona and California that are used for specific testing activities under conditions not found at Yuma Proving Ground. Therefore, these areas would not be considered in the development of alternatives for the RPMP PEIS.

All activities under consideration would be conducted within the boundaries of the installation. Resource areas that may be impacted include air quality, airspace, traffic, noise, water resources, biological resources, cultural resources, socioeconomics, utilities, land use, and solid and hazardous materials/waste. Impacts to these resources may occur as a result of converting existing land use to support military testing and training or from increasing the scope or magnitude of testing and training activities. The analysis will also consider the potential for cumulative environmental effects.

The public will be invited to participate in the scoping process to provide input on the proposed action and alternatives, which will be evaluated in the PEIS. After publication of the Notice of Intent to prepare the PEIS, the Army will schedule at least two public meetings to provide information about the proposed action