Revised 03/15/2022

HARBOR PORPOISE (*Phocoena phocoena*): San Francisco-Russian River Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

In the Pacific, harbor porpoise are found in coastal and inland waters from Point Conception, California to Alaska and across to Kamchatka and Japan (Gaskin 1984). Harbor porpoise appear to have more restricted movements along the western coast of the continental U.S. than along the eastern coast. Regional differences in pollutant residues in harbor porpoise indicate that they do not move extensively between California, Oregon, and Washington (Calambokidis and Barlow 1991). That study also showed regional differences within California (although the sample size was small). This pattern stands as a sharp contrast to the eastern coast of the U.S. and Canada where harbor porpoise are believed to migrate seasonally from as far south as the Carolinas to the Gulf of Maine and Bay of Fundy (Polacheck *et al*. 1995). A phylogeographic analysis of genetic data from northeast Pacific harbor porpoise did not show complete concordance between DNA sequence types and geographic location (Rosel 1992). However, an analysis of molecular variance (AMOVA) of the same data with additional samples found significant genetic differences for four of the six pair-wise comparisons between the four areas investigated: California, Washington, British Columbia, and Alaska (Rosel *et al*. 1995). These results demonstrate that harbor porpoise along the west coast of North America are not panmictic or migratory, and movement is sufficiently restricted that genetic differences have evolved. Subsequent genetic analyses of samples ranging from Morro Bay, California to British Columbia indicate that there is small-scale subdivision within the U.S. portion of this range (Chivers *et al.,* 2002, 2007; Morin *et al*., 2021). Six harbor porpoise stocks have been designated off California/Oregon/Washington, based on genetic analyses and density discontinuities identified from aerial surveys. The stock boundaries in waters off California and southern Oregon are shown in Figure 1. For the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) Stock Assessment Reports, Pacific coast harbor porpoise stocks include: 1) the Morro Bay stock (this report) 2) the Monterey Bay stock, 3) the San Francisco-Russian River stock, 4) the northern California/southern Oregon stock, 5) the northern Oregon/Washington coast stock, and 6) the Inland Washington stock. Three additional Alaskan harbor porpoise stocks are reported separately in the Alaska Stock Assessment Reports.

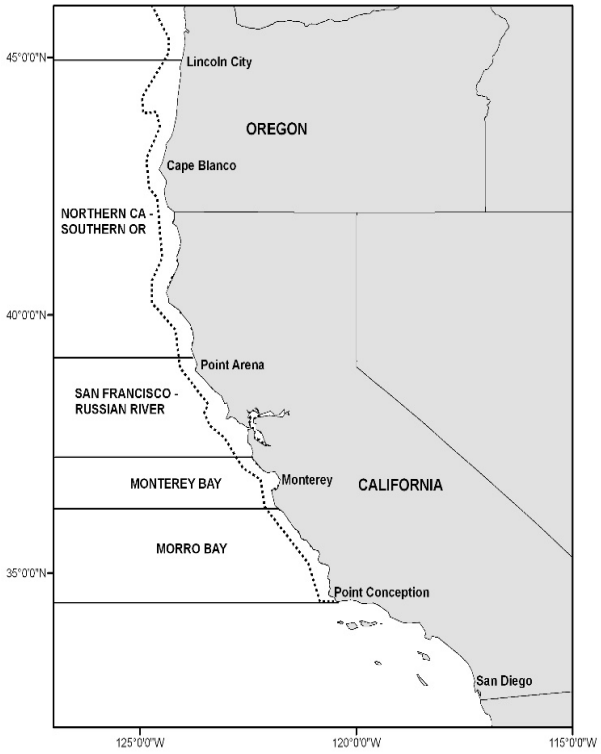

Figure 1. Stock boundaries and distributional range of harbor porpoise along the California and southern Oregon coasts. Dashed line represents harbor porpoise habitat (0-200 m) along the U.S. west coast.

POPULATION SIZE

Previous estimates of abundance for California harbor porpoise were based on aerial surveys conducted between the coast and the 50-fm isobath during 1988-95 (Barlow and Forney 1994, Forney 1999). These estimates did not include an unknown number of animals found in deeper waters. Barlow (1988) found that the vast majority of harbor porpoise in California were within the 0-50-fm depth range; however, Green *et al*. (1992) found that 24% of harbor porpoise seen during aerial surveys of Oregon and Washington were between the 100m and 200m isobaths (55 to 109 fathoms). A systematic ship survey of depth strata out to 90 m in northern California showed that porpoise abundance declined significantly in waters deeper than 60

m (Carretta *et al.* 2001). Since 1999, aerial surveys extended farther offshore (to the 200m depth contour or a minimum of 15 nmi from shore in the region of the San Francisco-Russian River stock) to provide a more complete abundance estimate (Forney *et al.* 2014). A recent analysis of long-term trends in the San Francisco-Russian River harbor porpoise stock (Forney *et al.* 2020) between 1986 and 2017 estimated a population size of 7,777 (CV=0.620) porpoises during 2017. This estimate includes a correction factor of 3.42 (1/g(0); g(0)=0.292, CV=0.366) (Laake *et al*. 1997) to adjust for groups missed by aerial observers, and it is the most recent estimate available for this stock.

Minimum Population Estimate

The minimum population estimate for the San Francisco-Russian River harbor porpoise stock is taken as the lower 20th percentile of the log-normal distribution of the abundance estimated from 1986 to 2017 aerial surveys, or 4,811 animals.

Current Population Trend

A hierarchical Bayesian analysis of harbor porpoise trends between 1986 and 2017 (Forney *et al.* 2020) showed an increase in population size following the elimination of gillnets from the range of the San Francisco – Russian River stock in 1987 (Forney *et al.* 2019). The population size peaked in 2005 at about 13,500 porpoises, and subsequently appeared to drop, leveling off at about 7,000-8,000 porpoises during 2010-2017 (Figure 2). Forney *et al.* (2020) noted that the apparent decrease after 2005 could be artefact of the large uncertainty in the abundance estimates during 2002-2007. Alternately, a shift in the distribution of harbor porpoise in this region, including a re-colonization of waters inside San Francisco Bay documented in 2009 (Stern *et al.* 2017), might have reduced their detectability during aerial surveys along the outer coast.

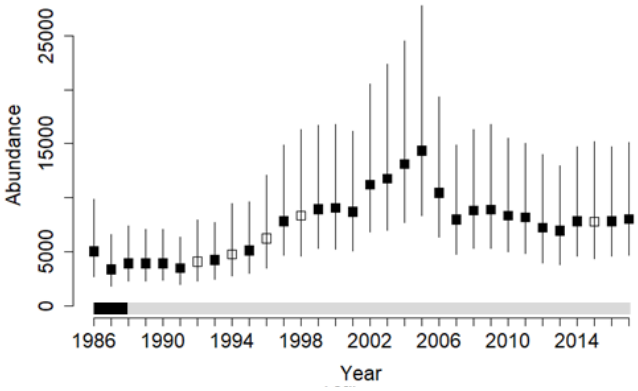

Figure 2. Population trends for the San Francisco-Russian River harbor porpoise stock, 1986-2017 (from Forney *et al.* 2020). Estimates represent median abundance (with 95% credible intervals) for years with survey effort (solid symbols) and without survey effort (open symbols). Shaded bars along the X-axis reflect the relative level of gillnet bycatch: high (black), or none (light gray).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Based on what are argued to be biological limits of the species (i.e. females give birth first at age 4 and produce one calf per year until death), the theoretical, maximum-conceivable growth rate of a closed harbor porpoise population was estimated as 9.4% per year based on a human survivorship curve (Barlow and Boveng 1991). This maximum theoretical rate represents maximum survival in a protected environment and may not be achievable for any wild population (Barlow and Boveng 1991). Woodley and Read (1991) calculate a maximum growth rate of approximately 5% per year, but their argument for this being a maximum (i.e. that porpoise survival rates cannot exceed those of Himalayan thar) is not well justified. Forney *et al.* (2020) estimated a growth rate of 6.1% per year (SE = 2.1%) for the San Francisco – Russian River harbor porpoise stock after gillnet fisheries were eliminated in 1987 until the population peaked and then leveled off in 2005. Although this growth rate cannot be considered a true maximum net productivity rate, because this stock's status relative to OSP in 1987 was unknown, it is greater than the default maximum net productivity rate (R_{MAX}) of 4% for cetaceans (Wade and Angliss 1997) and, therefore, can be considered a minimum estimate of R_{MAX} for this stock.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (4,811) times one half the maximum net growth rate estimated for this stock (½ of 6.1%) times a recovery factor of 0.5 (for a stock of unknown status; Wade and Angliss 1997), resulting in a PBR of 73.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

Although coastal gillnets are prohibited throughout this stock's range, there have been fishery-related strandings in past years. In the most recent five-year period (2015-2019), three fishery-related strandings of harbor porpoise were documented within the range of the San Francisco-Russian River stock (in 2015 and 2018; Carretta *et al.* 2021). Unidentified net fisheries were considered responsible for both porpoise deaths.

Table 1. Summary of available information on incidental mortality and injury of harbor porpoise (San Francisco-Russian River stock) in commercial fisheries that might take this species. Mean annual takes are based on 2015-2019 data, (Carretta *et al.* 2021). n/a indicates that data are not available.

Fishery Name	Year(s)	Data Type	Percent Observer Coverage	Observed Mortality	Kill/Day	Estimated Mortality (CV in parentheses)	Mean Annual Takes (CV in parentheses)
Unknown net fishery	2015-2019	stranding	n/a	2	n/a	≥ 2 (n/a)	≥ 0.4(n/a)
Minimum total annual takes							≥ 0.4 (n/a)

STATUS OF STOCK

Harbor porpoise in California are not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act nor as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Barlow and Hanan (1995) calculate the status of harbor porpoise relative to historic carrying capacity (K) using a technique called back-projection. They calculate that the central California population (including Morro Bay, Monterey Bay, and San Francisco-Russian River stocks) could have been reduced to between 30% and 97% of K by incidental fishing mortality, depending on the choice of input parameters. They conclude that there is no practical way to reduce the range of this estimate. Although Forney *et al.* (2020) documented a population increase in the San Francisco – Russian River harbor porpoise stock, the carrying capacity of this stock is not known, and the population status relative to Optimum Sustainable Population (OSP) levels must be treated as unknown. Because the known human-caused mortality or serious injury (≥ 0.4 harbor porpoise per year) is less than the PBR (73), this stock is not considered a "strategic" stock under the MMPA, and fishery mortality can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury rate. Harbor porpoises are sensitive to disturbance by a variety of anthropogenic sound sources, and the limited range of several U.S. West Coast harbor porpoise stocks makes them particularly vulnerable to potential impacts (see overview in Forney *et al*. 2017). A recent habitat concern along the U.S. West coast includes the use of acoustic deterrent devices ('seal bombs') that are used in commercial fishing activities off California (Simonis *et al*. 2020), especially in the Monterey Bay region.

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