

Environment

# Feds Consider Paintballs And Sponge Grenades To Thwart Endangered Monk Seals

Most commenters are against the idea but commercial fishermen and Wespac are in favor.



By Nathan Eagle / February 9, 2021

Reading time: 5 minutes.



Federal officials are weighing whether fishers should be allowed to shoot paintballs and fire sponge grenades at critically endangered Hawaiian monk seals to stop them from damaging their fishing gear, stealing their catch or compromising safety.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is in the process of reviewing more than 300 public comments — mostly in opposition — that it received last fall on its proposed rule. Congressmen, environmentalists, Oahu students, Native Hawaiians and others bristled at the idea.

U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva, who chairs the House Committee on Natural Resources, said he thinks the guidelines will only heighten conflict between humans and wildlife, and that the effects of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's proposed deterrents are poorly understood.

“In the face of climate change, fishing, pollution, and other human pressures, marine

mammals deserve more protections – not the unnecessary assault and harassment proposed by NOAA,” he told NOAA.



NOAA is considering rules that would allow fishermen to fire paintballs and sponge grenades at monk seals that are going after their fish.

Commercial fishers and the head of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, which advises NOAA on how to manage 1.5 million square miles of ocean, support the proposed rule.

Wespac Executive Director Kitty Simonds called the rule a “common sense exemption” to prevent damage to expensive fishing gear and catch as long as it does not seriously hurt or kill the animal.

She said encounters with marine mammals are likely to be rare anyway. And she added that using a paintball gun to deter a monk seal would be impractical for people fishing from boats because the rule would require shooting its “posterior end” and the seals often only pop their heads out of the water.

Simonds suggested the feds should focus final tweaks to the rule on ways to ensure the public understands it, such as being mindful of the use of feet versus meters when

describing how far away one needs to be to deploy some of the physical deterrents.

The proposed rule did garner some support from environmental and animal-rights groups in a broader sense as far as the feds finally creating guidelines after years of confusion over what was allowed. But that support was often qualified by criticism of the inclusion of paintballs and sponge grenades such as police officers use in some cities to quell riots.

“These long-overdue guidelines follow several years of requests for guidance from the public as well as expert workshops convened by NMFS,” said Sharon Young, senior strategist for marine issues with The Humane Society of the United States.

“While some regional offices, such as the west coast region, have had deterrent guidelines, most regions have lacked such guidance providing little transparency,” she said, adding that the humane society still recommends banning seal bombs and paintballs until they are studied more.

Others drew a deeper line in the sand.

Christine Tarski, a volunteer with the Hawaii Marine Animal Response team on Oahu, said she has stood for hundreds of hours with resting monk seals on the beach and witnessed terrible things people do like trying to hit them with rocks, sticks and even vehicles.

“I cannot believe such a horrid rule is being considered,” she said. “We have enough seal abuse and even deaths already without making it seem that it is okay to do so!”

Anthony Quintano/Civil Beat



Only shots to the “posterior end” of a monk seal would be allowed under the proposed rule.

Bertram Weeks, a fisherman and Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources biologist, said the Hawaiian monk seal is “very culturally significant to Hawaiian people and is considered by some as an aumakua, or physical representation of an ancestor or family lineage.”

He said it is one of only two native mammals to the islands, and is sometimes viewed as “hoailona, omens of other natural phenomenon.”

“Harming these animals, even in the act of defending one’s catch is extremely disrespectful to the cultural importance that has been given to monk seals,” Weeks said.

Ryan Jenkinson, of the DLNR Division of Aquatic Resources, said “the most obvious issues from our perspective include the lack of specificity of the proposed action, the outreach and effort necessary for the public to fully understand proposed rule changes, and the increased enforcement and messaging that will inevitably fall under State hands.”

He suggested exploring alternative means beyond letting the public deter monk seals with projectiles and grenades.

“There is very low confidence that most fishers will either actively target or only strike the posterior of the animal with projectiles,” Jenkinson said. “Our primary suggestion is to allow only State or Federal staff to participate in active projectile deterrent.”

After analyzing the public comments, NOAA Fisheries says it will publish the final rule and the associated rulemaking analyses.

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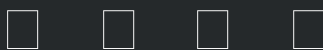
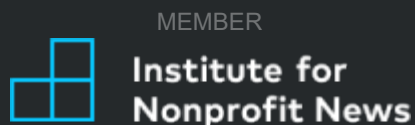
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