

## **BOEM ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES PROGRAM: Ongoing Studies**

**Region:** Pacific

**Planning Area(s):** Southern California

**Title:** Characterizing and Quantifying Sea Lion and Seal Use of Offshore Man-made Structures off California (PC-12-06)

**BOEM Information Need(s) to be Addressed:** Ultimately, offshore oil and gas platforms in California will be removed. California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) and, to a lesser extent, Pacific harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*) use these platforms as resting and foraging areas. Both species are protected by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). BOEM needs to characterize and quantify the use of these areas by sea lions and seals for environmental review and permitting associated with decommissioning of facilities. This study will also contribute to our understanding of sea lion and seal interactions with other offshore structures including renewable energy facilities being considered for the Pacific coast.

**Total BOEM Cost:** \$250,000      **Period of Performance:** FY 2012-2014

**Conducting Organization:** NMFS National Marine Mammal Laboratory

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Robert DeLong

**BOEM Contact:** [Greg Sanders](#)

### **Description:**

**Background:** Hundreds of sea lions and seals routinely use offshore oil and gas production facilities in California for resting and foraging. Removal of platforms will displace these animals but, perhaps more importantly, decommissioning activities could result in their injury or death. Characterizing and quantifying sea lion and seal use of offshore platforms is a critical component of our environmental analyses and consultations under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the MMPA.

**Objectives:** Characterize sea lion and seal use of the platforms, including the number of animals present, seasonal use patterns, and age and gender animals in the immediate vicinity of platforms. This information will be used to satisfy information needs for NEPA and MMPA and identify use patterns that may minimize disturbance or injury of sea lions and seals during decommissioning activities.

**Methods:** This study will count sea lions and seals using all 23 Pacific OCS oil and gas platforms under a variety of conditions (differing weather states, day versus night, etc.) and seasons. Activity trends will also be documented.

Sea lions resting on platform decks and buoys are relatively easy to count. Monthly observations conducted by boat and/or from the platforms will be made over a 2-year period. Swimming sea lions will also be counted when they are on the surface.

Surveys documenting daily activity patterns of sea lions will be developed through consultations with BOEM, the National Marine Fisheries Service, offshore operators, and prospective researchers, and may involve tagging or development of photo ID catalogs of individual animals.

Harbor seal use of platforms will be more difficult to document as this species typically does not haul-out on offshore structures and may sleep for extended periods of time under the platform. Observations may be limited to occasional sightings on the surface or opportunistic observations by SCUBA divers.

Survey methods will be developed, refined, and documented for future assessment of sea lion and seal activity associated with platform decommissioning activities.

**Current Status:** An initial characterization of all 23 Pacific OCS platforms was completed in November 2012. Five platforms were selected for focused study and cameras were installed in January 2013.

**Final Report Due:** 2014

**Publications Completed:** None at this time.

**Affiliated WWW sites:**

[http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/species/species\\_cal.php](http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/species/species_cal.php)

<http://www.afsc.noaa.gov/nmml/personnel/nmmlprofile.php?name=Robert.DeLong>

**Revised Date:** January 11, 2013