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MMS and NOAA Scientists Study Prey of Gulf of Mexico Sperm Whales

NOAA's New Research Vessel Trawling for Sperm Whale Prey in Deepwater Gulf of Mexico

NEW ORLEANS, LA. – Minerals Management Service (MMS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service biologists have set sail to learn more about the prey of sperm whales in the northern Gulf of Mexico. The first of the research cruise's three legs was completed on February 10, 2010 and the second is underway. The first and second legs of the cruise departed from the NOAA Fisheries Service's Southeast Fisheries Science Center laboratory in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

The $550,000 MMS-funded "Sperm Whale Acoustic Prey Study" is part of a cooperative interagency agreement between the MMS and the NOAA Fisheries Service. The results of this study will give each agency a better understanding of how the sperm whale, an endangered species, survives in the deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

"For over 36 years we have been gathering and synthesizing environmental information through the MMS Environmental Studies Program in the Gulf of Mexico," said MMS biologist Dr. Deborah Epperson, who is working on the study. "Studies such as this one aid in our understanding of marine mammals in the Gulf of Mexico, further enhancing our ability to responsibly manage these offshore areas."

Study results will characterize the potential prey of sperm whales and assess the prey's abundance, distribution, and diversity. Trawling will take place in the northern Gulf of Mexico in water depths ranging from 3,200 to 8,600 feet. As part of the study, MMS and NOAA Fisheries Service scientists will also collect data on a small isolated population of Bryde's whales, the Gulf's only resident baleen whale.

"We've assembled another great team of scientists for this cruise from NOAA and MMS," said Anthony Martinez, marine mammal scientist for NOAA Fisheries Service. "We are excited to continue our research on the feeding ecology of sperm whales, as this multidisciplinary study will help us better understand how these endangered large whales utilize their environment so we may better conserve and protect them."

The survey is being conducted aboard the NOAA ship Pisces, a new state-of-the-art 208-foot fisheries survey vessel, which features quiet-hull technology and carries a crew of 21 and up to 15 scientists on a given mission. The research team aboard the Pisces is comprised of scientists from MMS, NOAA's southeast and northeast fisheries science centers, and the Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology office.

Since the 1990s, the MMS has sponsored numerous studies of sperm whales. One such study included the six-year **Sperm Whale Seismic Study (SWSS)**. The **MMS-funded SWSS** study provided new information about sperm whales residing in the Gulf, and about their responses to human-created sounds. The "Sperm Whale Acoustic Prey Study" currently underway will address information gaps identified in SWSS.

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