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NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Interagency Study of Endangered Right Whales Planned

\$5 Million Study to Begin in the Bering Sea This Summer

WASHINGTON– The U. S. Department of the Interior’s Minerals Management Service (MMS) and the National Marine Mammal Laboratory of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) have agreed to collaboratively study the distribution, relative abundance, and habitat use of the endangered North Pacific right whales in the Bering Sea, north of the Aleutian Islands. The \$5 million research program will begin this summer and continue over the following three-and-one-half years.

Associate Director of Offshore Minerals Management, Chris Oynes explained that “this is an important part of MMS’s commitment to considering an oil and gas lease sale in 2011 in this area. Once MMS has collected sufficient background environmental information and the data on the right whale is obtained, MMS will be in a sound position to make informed decisions about potential leasing in the area.”

Field studies directed at the North Pacific right whale will use methods and advanced equipment proven successful in earlier studies of the right whales in the North Atlantic. Visual observations will be made from aircraft and ships, and whale sounds will be detected via shipboard listening devices to help locate the whales for tagging and for long-term monitoring of their distribution and abundance. Over the course of the project, several right whales will be tagged with satellite and acoustic tracking devices so that researchers can determine the locations and dive behavior of the whales in real-time over long distances. During the tagging operations, small tissue samples will be taken from the whales to allow genetic identification of individual whales through DNA genotyping, and to study whale diet and types of pollutants resident in their bodies. Samples of copepods--planktonic animals commonly eaten by the whales--will be taken to further study the whales’ diet and to investigate anthropogenic compounds that may be in the whales’ prey.

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Once abundant during the summer throughout the eastern North Pacific and Bering Sea, the North Pacific right whale now is one of the rarest stocks of baleen (filter-feeding) whales anywhere in the world. Little is known of their abundance, movements and current habitat use. Because of its endangered status under the Endangered Species Act, the North Pacific right whale is among the highest priorities for recovery efforts.

A planned oil and gas lease sale in the southern Bering Sea will not be held until 2011 to allow sufficient time for the collection of the necessary environmental data on all marine organisms living full-time or part-time in the area that could be adversely affected by offshore operations. Under this schedule, exploratory drilling and related operations would not begin until 2012 or later. The cooperative research on the right whales is expected to provide important information to make the required environmental impact assessment of the proposed oil and gas development. MMS will also work with the National Marine Fisheries Service and other interested parties in protecting living resources while facilitating energy resource development.

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