

Executive summary

Agency Name and Mission: The Marine Mammal Commission (Commission) serves the American public by providing independent, science-based oversight of domestic and international policies and actions of federal agencies relating to the conservation of marine mammals and their ecosystems. Our mission stems from and is largely driven by the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The MMPA was enacted in 1972, partially in response to growing concerns among scientists and the general public that certain species and populations of marine mammals were in danger of extinction or depletion as a result of human activities.

The Commission is not an “action agency” in the typical sense. It is not a regulatory agency and generally does not provide services directly to the public. Rather, it is tasked with reviewing the condition of marine mammal stocks, promoting studies directed at understanding the status of and threats to marine mammals and their habitats, and making recommendations to other federal agencies and Congress on measures necessary or desirable for protecting and conserving marine mammals and for furthering the policies of the MMPA. Through this process, the public gains general benefits that accrue from healthier marine mammal populations and more robust marine ecosystems, but those benefits are, for the most part, shared equally across society as a whole. Usually, it is only when a regulatory agency acts on a Commission recommendation that equity considerations are implicated and, even then, such actions rarely raise equity concerns.

The Commission’s mission does not specifically include serving underrepresented or disadvantaged communities, except for Alaska Native communities. In formulating recommendations designed to further the purposes of the MMPA, the Commission is to consider “provisions for the protection of the Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts whose livelihood may be adversely affected by actions taken pursuant to this Act.” The Commission takes this responsibility seriously. It has appointed a Special Advisor on Native Affairs, has an Alaska Native Liaison on staff, and works closely with a host of Alaska Native Organizations on marine mammal issues. Thus, communities that may be considered to be underrepresented or disadvantaged in other contexts receive heightened attention in matters before the Commission.

Summary of Action Plan: The Commission seeks to be as inclusive as possible in carrying out its mission. Following a period of assessment consistent with Executive Order 13985, the Commission determined that there are limited opportunities for the agency to address equity due to the agency’s targeted mission, small staff size, and advisory role. The Commission’s annual appropriations are less than \$4 million, with much of that devoted to salaries, office space, and other operational expenses. The remaining (discretionary) expenditures are directed mostly at the Commission’s small grants program. Although procurement and other funding opportunities are relatively modest, the Commission strives to use small businesses, including women or minority owned businesses, and frequently funds projects through its grants program that are designed to benefit underserved communities. Under this action plan, the Commission intends to undertake three additional actions to address barriers to equity within the agency’s mission and scope of work. These actions include: 1) supporting efforts to increase diversity in marine mammal sciences, 2) increasing awareness of and access to Commission business, and 3) addressing barriers to the availability of a diverse workforce.

Summary of early accomplishments

The Commission’s early accomplishments towards advancing equity under E.O. 13985 span across the agency’s work, including a review of how the agency consults with Tribes (particularly in Alaska), changes to and successes of the Commission’s small grants program, supporting the equity-related work of the marine mammal professional scientific society, and emphasizing equity when sponsoring meetings and conferences.

The Commission seeks to be as inclusive as possible in carrying out its mission, especially in its work with Alaska Native communities. In keeping with the limited scope of its programs, the Commission conducted its equity assessment in parallel with its review of the Commission’s Tribal consultation responsibilities under E.O. 13175. The Commission undertook focused consultations with representatives of coastal, often remote Alaska villages, and with the Makah Tribe in Washington State in developing the agency’s updated Tribal Consultation Action Plan, which it has submitted to OMB and is available on the Commission’s website.

In fiscal year 2021, the Commission requested that research proposals submitted under its grant program include an outreach, communication, or engagement component. Additional weight was given to proposals that increased the inclusion or representation of people from underrepresented groups in marine mammal research, management, or conservation. We funded eight projects, six of which self-identified that their projects increased the inclusion or representation of people from underrepresented groups in marine mammal research, management, or conservation. One highlight among the Commission’s grants is co-funding a project with the Office of Naval Research to develop a paid internship program to expand diversity and inclusion in marine mammal science. This project will establish a network of Minority-Serving Institutions and research organizations with well-trained mentors committed to strengthening the pipeline of minorities into marine mammal research.

In 2021, the Commission also engaged with the primary professional organization for marine mammal scientists (the Society for Marine Mammalogy) in ongoing efforts to identify and pursue mechanisms to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion within this discipline. The community the Society represents constitutes a primary source for expertise and potential employees to the Commission and other federal agencies involved in marine mammal research, conservation, and management.

Every year, the Commission provides modest financial support to professional meetings, conferences, symposia, and workshops. Since E.O. 13985 was issued, the Commission has found opportunities to continue supporting these types of meetings, while placing higher priority on furthering equity goals. For example, the Commission partnered with the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation on the 2021 Capitol Hill Ocean Week, which was focused on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. The Commission sponsored a plenary session on “Indigenous and Local Knowledge and Wisdom for Strengthening Conservation.” Additionally, the Commission provided financial support for other meetings, conferences, and symposia to provide translation services, grants for participants who identify as members of an underrepresented group, and travel funds for students, younger faculty, representatives of low-income countries, and a key speaker who otherwise would likely not have been able to attend.

Equity Action #1: Support efforts to increase diversity in marine mammal sciences

Barrier to Equitable Outcome

The marine mammal science community has grown significantly in recent years but its demographics remain overwhelmingly white, primarily from North America and Europe ([Srinivasan 2018](#)). The field of marine mammal science has attracted an increasing number of young women, as is the case in other STEM fields, but the advancement of women to senior positions and the recruitment of workers that are disabled, economically disadvantaged, or from minority racial and ethnic groups have been identified as challenges across the scientific workforce ([Royal Society 2014](#)).

Although few studies are available to identify which factors represent the most significant obstacles to recruitment and advancement of a diverse marine mammal science workforce, obstacles may include—

- a limited number of marine science programs geared to middle and high school age students, especially in under-represented communities;
- a limited number of paid internship or research assistantship positions at the undergraduate and graduate level, and the resulting exclusion of economically disadvantaged groups ([Fournier and Bond 2015](#));
- [strong competition](#) for positions that are available (both paid and unpaid);
- limited opportunities to acquire the specialized skills and experience required to advance to senior positions; and
- family care-giving responsibilities that preclude travel and heavy fieldwork required in many marine mammal science positions (predominantly affecting women, [Hooker et al. 2017](#)).

Action and Intended Impact on Barrier

To address barriers to recruitment and advancement of under-represented workers in the field of marine mammal science, the Commission has initiated several activities—

- providing funding to the [Society for Marine Mammalogy](#) and other conference organizers to support participation by undergraduate and graduate students from disadvantaged or under-represented sectors, as well as from low-income countries;
- participating in career life-balance workshops geared towards women in marine mammal science at Society for Marine Mammalogy conferences and other venues as available;
- partnering with the Office of Naval Research to fund an initiative at [Savannah State University](#) and other Minority-Serving Institutions to mentor undergraduate and graduate students in marine mammal and marine environmental science;
- exploring with other agencies approaches for measuring the effectiveness of federal grant programs as mechanisms to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion; and
- providing [career and educational resources](#) on the Commission’s website for aspiring marine mammal scientists.

Tracking Progress

The Commission will track progress in partnership with the [Society for Marine Mammalogy](#), an organization that promotes the global advancement of marine mammal science and contributes to

Executive Order 13985 – Equity Action Plan

its relevance and impact in education, conservation, and management. Some measures that will be used to track progress on the short- and long-term include:

- Initiate and coordinate conversations with federal partners, including the Office of Naval Research, about further involvement in the Savannah State University led mentoring initiative with Minority-Serving Institutions.
- Work with the Society for Marine Mammalogy Diversity and Inclusion Committee to gather resources for aspiring marine mammal scientists and assess ways to make resources more accessible
- Revise career resources webpage to highlight paid internship opportunities to advance inclusion in the marine mammal sciences as well as opportunities geared towards underrepresented minority students.
- Utilize website analytics to track visitation to and effectiveness of Commission career resources webpages.

Accountability

The Commission intends to summarize its activities and progress in meeting its equity, diversity, and inclusion objectives on the agency website, and by sharing the summary in other appropriate outlets (e.g., Commission newsletters).

REFERENCES

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- Royal Society. 2014. A picture of the U.K. scientific workforce: Diversity data analysis for the Royal Society, Executive Summary. 4 pages.
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Equity Action #2: Increase access to and awareness of Commission business

Barrier to Equitable Outcome

The Commission’s primary stakeholders include other federal agencies, Congress, the scientific community, those whose activities affect marine mammals and their habitats, and the general public. One way in which the Commission engages with local communities is through its public meetings.

The meetings are open to the public and, in recent years, meetings have been made available via webinar. While the agency cannot predict the extent to which various underrepresented communities will be engaged in the future, Commission meetings are one of the most important ways the Commission interacts directly with the public. In planning and conducting recent meetings, examples of communities that the Commission has engaged with and listened to include Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiian Islanders, Tribes, and fishers, among others.

The primary way of informing local community members of such meetings or events, other than those we consult in organizing the meetings, is through posting notices in the *Federal Register*, on the Commission website, and via Commission social media channels. However, these notices generally are not targeted at specific communities or sectors. Current engagement with stakeholders at these meetings is likely reaching those already following the Commission’s work and issues.

After an evaluation of current stakeholder engagement practices, the Commission has identified opportunities to increase access to and awareness of important Commission business, such as agency meetings and events. The desired outcome is engaging a broader community that might be unaware of federal actions and policies related to marine mammals, their ecosystems, and the adjacent communities, while also supporting the goal of Equity Action 1. These actions are expected to reduce barriers to receiving information about agency activities and opportunities that the Commission provides.

Action and Intended Impact on Barrier

The Commission will develop and implement three key, achievable actions to increase awareness of and access to Commission business:

1. The Commission will assess, develop, and implement an outreach strategy to engage and inform local communities concurrent with planning meetings and events. These strategies will target the breadth of local communities relevant to a given meeting or event so that issues of particular concern to them can be incorporated into the Commission’s agenda as appropriate. One outreach strategy under consideration is to notify local academic and research institutions that already are in contact with local stakeholders. This approach is expected to broaden awareness of Commission business to community members as well as students and early career scientists.
2. The Commission currently provides needs-based travel funding for some invited meeting participants. The Commission will assess the need to provide additional financial support so that members of underrepresented groups can attend Commission meetings and events

and will explore additional avenues through which they can participate in those meetings and events remotely. This assessment has the potential to reduce barriers to equitable access to Commission meetings and events.

3. The Commission will explore ways to expand virtual capabilities for the public to attend and participate in Commission meetings and events. Alternatives under review include closed captioning, transcripts, and live, interactive video feeds. Providing means to attend our meetings virtually has greatly increased access to Commission information; attendance of agency meetings has doubled since providing a virtual option.

Tracking Progress

The Commission will employ new measures to track progress on increasing awareness of and access to Commission business. For each meeting and event, these measures include:

- Generating an expanded list of diverse stakeholders in local communities with interest in topics covered by Commission meetings and events.
- Implementing an outreach strategy to notify a broad spectrum of stakeholder groups and soliciting their feedback on issues and concerns to be addressed at the meeting. The Commission likely will need to employ diverse communication methods to reach different target groups. Methods under consideration include social media, local media and press, email announcements, and outreach to key representatives of stakeholder groups.
- Assessing the availability of and need for additional financial support to promote participation by members of underrepresented groups that otherwise could not attend Commission meetings and events.
- Exploring the costs and benefits associated with providing additional meeting services such as closed captioning, transcripts, and live, interactive video capabilities and soliciting bids for those that make sense.

Following completion of these actions and measures, the Commission’s meeting and event attendance should increase over the next 2-4 years, especially among targeted audiences identified during planning stages. The Commission will continue to track meeting attendance and seek to assess shifts in the make-up (diversity) of meeting participants and attendees.

Accountability

The Commission will rely on different staff to target and engage in outreach to different stakeholders. For example, the Commission will rely on the Communications and Legislative Affairs Officer to assess, develop, and implement the overall outreach strategy for Commission business. Commission staff with lead responsibility on certain topics or issues will assist in implementing that strategy. For example, the Commission’s Tribal liaisons will have lead responsibility for outreach to Tribes and Alaska Native communities. The Commission’s Executive Director, in consultation with staff, will make decisions on providing financial support to meeting participants.

Progress will be communicated in Commission newsletters, as well as in the agency’s Performance and Accountability Reports.

Equity Action #3: Address barriers to the availability of a diverse workforce

Barrier to Equitable Outcome

Diversity among those engaged in marine mammal, marine, and conservation sciences is relatively low. This is evident in the make-up of professional societies for these disciplines and in governmental environmental agencies, such as the Commission, that draw from those pools when seeking prospective employees. The Commission’s unique mission and scope of work calls for a specialized workforce with the skills necessary to carry out the agency’s targeted duties assigned by Congress, reflects the needs of stakeholders, and furthers the agency’s equity goals. However, being a “micro-agency” with a staff of only 13 and very low turnover, few entry-level positions, and a need for certain types of expertise, there may be limited opportunities to recruit a more diverse workforce, or at least to do so quickly. In addition to its full-time federal employees, the Commission also utilizes or could utilize detailees, contractors, and fellows. Internships are provided regularly at the high school level and less frequently to undergraduates.

Another impediment the Commission faces is its reliance on other federal agencies to provide certain administrative services. For example, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provides services related to employee recruitment and does the initial vetting of candidates. Although final hiring decisions are left to the Commission, the Commission does not advertise vacancies on its own, does not collect information on applicant pools, and generally is only aware of who has applied if they are certified and referred to it by OPM.

The barriers being addressed are tapping into a more diverse applicant pool and increasing the chances that diverse applicants will pass the OPM vetting process. Given the overlap with the Commission’s diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility responsibilities under E.O. 14035, we anticipate conducting this action in tandem with the goal of fulfilling the Commission’s mission more equitably.

The primary outcome that the Commission hopes to achieve in the near- and mid-term (2-4 years out) is the development and implementation of a few targeted actions that will enable it to begin working towards strengthening workforce diversity, through future hiring and temporary work opportunities outside of the OPM hiring process, such as interns, fellows, contractors, and detailees.

Action and Intended Impact on Barrier

The Commission will develop and implement four key, achievable actions towards strengthening workforce diversity:

1. The Commission will continue to provide a high school credit-earning internship program for seniors with interest in marine mammal science and will evaluate the current program and explore means to open this to a more diverse applicant pool.
2. The Commission will advertise employee vacancies and other work opportunities more broadly. Currently, the Commission relies primarily on OPM to provide recruitment services via USAjobs.gov for available positions. In addition to OPM-led recruitment, the

Executive Order 13985 – Equity Action Plan

Commission will, as appropriate, post open positions, internships, or other opportunities on the Commission’s website and share relevant listings with Tribes, Alaska Native organizations, universities and relevant professional organizations with wide-ranging memberships and/or demonstrated commitment to supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion. This is expected to increase awareness about opportunities at the Commission with a larger and more diverse applicant pool.

3. The Commission will provide training opportunities for staff on the importance of workforce diversity. Such training will include training related to unconscious or implicit bias, which may be particularly relevant to those engaged in recruitment and hiring decisions.
4. The Commission will consider ways to incorporate diversity-, equity-, and inclusion-related topics into interviews with applicants. Not only is the Commission striving to achieve a more diverse workforce, but also sees a need to convey to potential applicants the agency’s commitment to fostering an inclusive working environment.
5. The Commission will continue to pursue its commitment to strengthening diversity in the fields of marine mammal sciences and ocean policy more generally. The expected downstream effect of such efforts is to expand the diversity of the pool of qualified applicants from which the Commission and other agencies with related missions draw.

Tracking Progress

The Commission does not currently have access to information on applicant pools, nor does it expect to have such access in the future. However, relatively simple factors can be used to track progress on the Commission’s work to make hiring practices and other opportunities more equitable. These measures may include:

- Developing generally applicable position-advertising checklists to ensure consistent advertising through time.
- Establishing a list of professional listservs, organizations, and universities to be sent notices when advertising positions and opportunities at the agency.
- Establishing a resource guide, which would include a list of diversity-focused training tools available for agency hiring committees and all staff.
- Consulting with other agencies about best practices for incorporating diversity-, equity-, and inclusivity-related topics into interviews.

Over time these progress-tracking measures will be evaluated to assess the effectiveness of these practices. Periodic assessment of these actions will also be critical to the continuation of agency efforts to strengthen workforce diversity.

Accountability

The Commission will task a subset of its Agency Equity Team to develop and implement these actions and measures. This team will include at least the Executive Director, Administrative Officer, and the Communications and Legislative Affairs Officer.