

October 2004

U.S. House of Representatives urged to not take action on H.R. 5104, legislation that weakens laws protecting marine mammals from destructive fishing gear.

PRESS RELEASE: U.S. HOUSE BILL WOULD THREATEN WHALES, DOLPHINS AND SEALS
Oceana to House: Don't Vote on Legislation That Weakens Marine Mammal Protection Act

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT:

Bianca DeLille

Oceana

2501 M Street NW, Suite 300

Washington, DC 20037

Phone: (202) 833-3900

Fax: (202) 833-2070

bdelille@oceana.org

October 5, 2004

Washington DC --

Oceana today urged the U.S. House of Representatives not to take action on H.R. 5104, legislation recently passed by the House Resources Committee that would weaken the existing law that protects whales, dolphins, seals and other marine mammals from destructive fishing gear.

Oceana opposes H.R. 5104, which waters down protections currently included in the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), primarily because the proposed changes would eliminate significant deadlines to reduce the number of marine mammals captured and killed each year during commercial fishing operations.

Every year thousands of marine mammals, including whales, dolphins, seals and porpoises, are unintentionally but commonly caught and killed in fishing gear, a problem referred to as bycatch. The MMPA sets a national goal to significantly reduce bycatch, but commercial vessels using indiscriminate fishing gear such as gillnets, trawl nets, and pelagic longlines catch these marine animals in addition to the fish they intend to catch. The whales, dolphins and other animals are then discarded – often injured, dead or dying.

“Unless key changes are made to these amendments to the Marine Mammal Protection Act, Oceana strongly urges the U.S. House not to vote on this bill this year,” said Ted Morton, Oceana’s federal policy director. “It is clearly established that our oceans are in trouble and more needs to be

done to prevent the decline of ocean wildlife populations.”

A fundamental requirement of the MMPA is for commercial fishermen, working with the National Marine Fisheries Service, to reduce the death and injury rate of marine mammals to insignificant levels. Ten years ago, Congress set April 2001 as the deadline to meet this goal (a deadline that was missed). H.R. 5104 deletes that deadline and fails to put forward a new target date for achieving the goal.

“Most of us set personal deadlines for ourselves to save for a house or a car. When we don’t, we often fail to reach our goals,” said Morton. “In the same vein, deadlines work to convince a federal agency to take the law more seriously and improve chances that positive results will be achieved,” said Morton.

Commercial fishing gear causes injury and death for many marine mammals. Because marine mammals breathe air, entanglement in fishing gear that forces them to remain underwater causes stress, and, frequently, drowning. In addition, a stronger animal such as a whale will often carry the gear with it as it tries to swim away. If the gear remains wrapped around the animal, it can cut into and become imbedded in the skin, impairing movements, inhibiting feeding, altering breeding, and causing infections, which can lead to death.