

## Recording and reporting MMO data

### Background

Marine seismic surveys (MSSs) undertaken for the purpose of petroleum and greenhouse gas exploration in Australian Commonwealth waters are subject to the requirements of the Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Environment) Regulations 2009 (Environment Regulations). These regulations require an environment plan (EP) to be accepted by NOPSEMA prior to any offshore petroleum or greenhouse gas activity commencing. Among other things, the EP must describe the requirements that apply to the environmental management of the activity and demonstrate how those requirements will be met. One of the requirements applying to MSSs, is set out in the [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 - Policy Statement 2.1 – Interaction between offshore seismic exploration and whales](#) (September, 2008).

A requirements of Policy Statement 2.1 is for MSS proponents to record and report marine mammal observer (MMO) data. NOPSEMA has identified a need to provide titleholders, seismic operators and MMOs clarification on the preferred details and format for recording MMO data, and reporting the data to the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment (the Department). Furthermore, while the primary focus of Policy Statement 2.1 and its requirement for data reporting is on whales, NOPSEMA and the Department encourages MMO reporting on the presence of other fauna groups (e.g. marine turtles).

The intent of this bulletin is to clarify Australian Government requirements for the recording and reporting of marine fauna sighting information to the Department. Separate requirements under the Environment Regulations for reporting environmental performance to NOPSEMA are out of scope for this bulletin.

This bulletin has been prepared in collaboration with the Department to ensure the advice on how MMO sightings data should be recorded and uploaded is representative of the Australian Government's preferred approach.

### The issue

A recent review of data received by the Department for MSS in Commonwealth waters has indicated that a number of marine fauna sightings reports are in non-standard formats, datasets are at times of poor quality and/or recorded inconsistently between titleholders/seismic operators.

Given the time that has elapsed since publication of Policy Statement 2.1, and in lieu of a formal update, the intent of this bulletin is to provide advice that assists users of Policy Statement 2.1 to record and report their MMO data in a nationally-consistent way.

Policy Statement 2.1 and information on compliance and sighting reports can be accessed at [EPBC Act Policy Statement 2.1 – Interaction between offshore seismic exploration and whales](#)

## What is needed?

A consistent and robust approach to recording and reporting MMO data from MSSs will enhance the utility of the data by government and industry. Enhancing the current quality and consistency of submitted data is expected to increase its reliability, and in turn, its applicability to species conservation management/policy initiatives and environmental management.

For example, high quality and standardised data is needed to ensure it is compatible with the [National Marine Mammal Database](#) (NMMD) and contributes to important marine mammal conservation and policy initiatives driven by the Australian Government. There is also a mutually beneficial opportunity for the data, if captured in a consistent manner, to have enhanced utility for titleholder planning of MSSs. For example, the data may enable titleholders to plan their work so as to avoid periods with higher potential for fauna interactions and ensure mitigation measures are matched to the risks.

The key components of high quality and standardised data include:

- Accurate recordings of date, time and location for all sightings together with information on the weather/sighting conditions.
- MMO effort recorded for each shift, together with regular reporting of the weather/sightings conditions irrespective of sightings.
- Consistent method of recording weather conditions including visibility and Beaufort Scale.
- Reliable species identification and distance to sighted marine fauna.
- Consistent categorisation of behaviour and behavioural response to the airgun (where possible).

## Preferred format for recording and reporting MMO data to the Department

- Titleholders, seismic operators, and MMOs are advised to use the Cetacean Sightings Application (CSA) or at least follow its data schema.
- CSA software and its data schema can be downloaded for free from: [data.marinemammals.gov.au/csa](https://data.marinemammals.gov.au/csa).
- While Policy Statement 2.1 states that whale sightings should be recorded on a sightings form and submitted to the Department within two months of the completion of the survey, from 10 November 2008 the method for recording sightings and survey information is to use the CSA.
- Upon completion of the MSS, the information entered into the CSA should be exported as an XML file and emailed to [sightingsdata@aad.gov.au](mailto:sightingsdata@aad.gov.au) as per the instructions within the application.
- The CSA XML export should be submitted regardless of whether cetaceans were sighted. An email confirmation from the Department will be sent upon receipt of each submission.

## Why use CSA for data recording?

- Standardising data collected will increase its utility for other applications, and facilitate easy upload of the data to NMMD.
- The CSA method facilitates the consistent recording and reporting of cetacean (and other fauna) sightings and related seismic survey data to the Australian government.
- The latest edition of the CSA has the capacity for the entry of sightings of non-cetacean species through the user-defined species options, meaning its functionality and applicability can be extended to other species of conservation concern, such as marine turtles.

## The legislation

Offshore Petroleum and Greenhouse Gas Storage (Environment) Regulations 2009:

- Regulation 13(4) states that an environment plan must describe the requirements, including legislative requirements that apply to the activity and are relevant to the environmental management of the activity; and demonstrate how those requirements will be met.

EPBC Act Policy Statement 2.1:

- Section A.4 details the reporting requirements. This includes submission of a report on the conduct of the MSS to the Department within two months of survey completion. The report should include:
  - Location, date and start time of survey
  - Name, qualifications and experience of MMOs (or research scientists) involved in the survey
  - Location, times and reasons when observations were hampered by poor sighting conditions
  - Location and time of start-up delays, power downs, or stop work procedures as a result of marine fauna sightings
  - Location, time and distance of any whale sightings including species where possible
  - Date and time of survey completion.
- These details should be captured within the CSA, and the text file exported and submitted to [sightingsdata@aad.gov.au](mailto:sightingsdata@aad.gov.au) at the completion of the survey.

## Further reading

The National Marine Mammal Data Portal: A collaborative repository to support marine mammal conservation and policy can be accessed at [EPBC Act Policy Statement 2.1 – Interaction between offshore seismic exploration and whales](#)

## Contact

Enquiries should be directed to [communications@nopsema.gov.au](mailto:communications@nopsema.gov.au) and quote 'Environment bulletin – Recording and reporting MMO data'.

## References

Australian Antarctic Division, Department of the Environment, 2015. Information Sheet - *The National Marine Mammal Data Portal: A collaborative repository to support marine mammal conservation and policy*, viewed 26 Mar 2020

[Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts, 2008. EPBC Act Policy Statement 2.1 – Interaction between offshore seismic exploration and whales, viewed 25 Mar 2020](#)

[Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#)