SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP ON ABUNDANCE ESTIMATES

17 December 2025, Online

MEETING MINUTES

Participants: *Anita Gilles, Bjarni Mikkelsen, Daniel Pike (Chair), Geneviève Desportes, Gudjón Már Sigurðsson, Maria Garagouni, Martin Biuw, Philip Hammond*

Pike welcomed participants to another meeting of the AEWG, the aim of which was to review updated analyses of for fin and minke whales from the Faroese and Icelandic shipboard surveys in NASS 2024.

Sigurðsson presented a working document on the abundance estimation progress thus far. Following the recommendation of the AEWG at the September meeting, the analysis was conducted on restratified survey blocks (removing unsurveyed areas) and only including sightings from the designed transects in the estimation of abundance (while all sightings were included when modelling the detection function).

Insufficient information was presented to judge the robustness of the uncorrected estimates, and a correction for perception bias had not yet been completed for either species. As such, the AEWG could not endorse any of the presented results. However, suggestions were made to improve the existing analysis, such that:

- The sightings included in the calculation of abundance should be carefully screened, because it was noted that off-effort observations may have been included.
- Different truncation distances could be explored rather than the default 5% of sightings used—this could change the number of observations available for the selection of the detection function.
- The incorporation of uncertain species IDs could be conducted differently to avoid fitting a detection function to data from a small number of sightings. This was initially suggested for the "Large baleen whale" ID code used in the Faroese surveys, but could also be applied to the Icelandic dataset. The approach used in SCANS-III was described, whereby a detection function was fitted to data for all large baleen whales (identified to species or not). Species ID could be included as a candidate covariate but, whether it is retained in the final detection function or not, the overall detection function can be used for estimating abundance of subsets of the large baleen whale data.

The group requested that the updated analysis be presented (by early January) with more detail, including information on block-level average group size and encounter rate, as well as strip width, all of which are needed for a comprehensive understanding of the results.

Regarding the distribution of sightings, it was noted that a larger number of minke whales were observed in coastal waters around Iceland than in surveys after 2001, suggesting some re-colonisation of the area. The total number of sightings also appears higher than in NASS 2015. As a result, the final estimate will be higher than that realised in 2015. The lack of survey effort off Western Iceland, a major

concentration area for fin whales, means that the estimate for this species will be lower than those from recent NASS.