

January 14<sup>th</sup> 2022



## **A request for continued funding of the Long-term Killer Whale monitoring Project**

To the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council,

We proposed continuation of our Killer Whale Monitoring Project for 2022-2031, as part of the Gulf Watch Long Term Research and Monitoring Program. This project was initiated in 1984 and represents one of the few time series with pre-spill data for an injured resource. Our proposal was well received by the Public Advisory Committee, the Science Review Panel and the Executive Director of the Trustee Council, and recommended for funding. This recommendation has not been adopted by the Trustee Council.

We have documented the spill to have clear, long-term and continuing effects on the killer whales that were exposed. The AB pod of Alaska Resident killer whales has not recovered and the AT1 Transient population is heading for extinction. The AB pod was on 30+ year recovery trajectory since the spill, but apparently has suffered a major setback following the recent marine heatwave. This demonstrates that we need to continue monitoring to assess recovery potential, and to understand the interacting importance of environmental drivers.

The science panel provided constructive comments on how the valuable datasets this project has generated over 37 years should be more fully used in mechanistic analyses to facilitate a broader ecosystem understanding. In response, we have proposed new field and analytical methods, and brought on new staff, to build on our existing time series to better integrate our data into ecosystem synthesis efforts. This will allow us to understand mechanisms of population change (long response time) by linking to body condition, growth, diet and distribution (short response times). We propose to increase the frequency of data products and reporting to facilitate integration with other Gulf Watch projects. As top marine predators, the individual and population health of killer whales indicate the status of the ecosystem that support them. As such, our project is a key component of long-term ecosystem monitoring.

We are disappointed that the Trustee Council has not adopted the recommendations to continue funding for our project. We respectfully request that this decision be reviewed to follow the recommendations of the Public Advisory Committee, Science Panel and Executive Director, in addition to numerous public comments made on behalf of this project.

Sincerely,

Dr. John Durban, Craig Matkin and Dan Olson