

Rough Toothed Dolphin Mass Stranding Event- March 2, 2005

Public Debriefing August 24, 2005 Marathon Garden Club – Florida Keys

I. Purpose of Debriefing

The purpose of the meeting was to conduct a debriefing among volunteers, government agencies (federal, state, county), and stranding network members to evaluate the response to a rough tooth dolphin mass stranding that occurred off of Marathon, Florida on March 2, 2005. The meeting was open to the public. A professional facilitator (Kristy Ellenburg from Ellenburg Associates) helped the group assess the following questions: what went well, what needs improvement and what are specific steps to improve response, rehabilitation and release for future mass stranding events in the Florida Keys.

The overall debriefing process was designed to: 1) evaluate the response, rehabilitation and release phases of the rough toothed dolphin stranding; 2) enhance relationships with partners and stakeholders involved in the event; 3) receive input from stakeholders and the public; 4) address questions and comments from the public; and 5) to identify specific actions to improve response, rehabilitation and release for future mass stranding events.

Thirty participants attended the meeting. These included representatives from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), Marine Animal Rescue Society (MARS), Florida Key Marine Mammal Rescue Team (FKMMRT), the Dolphin Freedom Foundation, Marine Mammal Conservancy (MMC), Monroe County, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS), Monroe County Sheriffs' Office and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Several members of the public also attended the meeting.

II. Background of the mass stranding event

On the afternoon of March 2, 2005 a mass stranding of at least 62 rough toothed dolphins occurred on the Atlantic side of Marathon, Florida in the Florida Keys. The rescue effort included the following responders: FKMMRT, MMC, MARS, USCG, FWCC, NMFS, Dolphin Research Center, FKNMS, Monroe County Sheriffs office and the general public. This stranding posed many challenges as dolphins were spread out in different locations offshore and in residential canals near shore. Also, unusually cold weather posed human safety risks during the response due to hypothermia. Most of the dolphins were moved on the first night to a central location in a canal for triage and health evaluation. The remaining animals were moved into the triage canal the following day. Some of the animals were tagged and given health evaluations. Logistical difficulties prevented the tagging and evaluation of all free-swimming animals in the canal.

FWCC, Monroe County Sheriffs Office, USCG, and the FKNMS contributed greatly in the initial response effort by providing vessel support, utilization of the Mobile Command Unit, assistance in securing the stranding site, and on-site media coordination.

In the following days two teams were established. One team was devoted strictly to live animals, and one was dedicated to collecting data from dolphin carcasses. Stranding network members from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, University of Tennessee, FMRI, NOAA Beaufort Lab and NOAA Office of Protected Resources in Silver Springs, MD came to the keys to conduct necropsies and data to evaluate the cause of death and investigate the cause of the stranding. Carcasses were also sent to FMRI and Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute (HBOI) for necropsy as the response continued and more animals either expired or were euthanized.

III. Meeting synopsis

To facilitate individual participation and substantive feedback, breakout groups used flip charts to identify “what went well?” and “what needs improvement?” for each of the three phases of the stranding event (response, rehabilitation and release). The entire group reconvened after each phase to discuss issues and clarify points. Topics most frequently discussed included 1) safety, 2) training, 3) communication and 4) following authority. As reflected in past debriefings many of the same points were brought up in both “what went well” and “what needs improvement”. A summary of breakout group discussions on each topic area follows.

A. Response

A response effort mobilized quickly for this stranding event. There was a tremendous amount of support from law enforcement agencies, the stranding network and volunteers. The first time use of the Incident Command System proved useful once roles were clearly defined and followed. The outpouring of support from the local community was vital to the success of the response. The assistance from outside Stranding network members to conduct necropsies proved to be critical to the overall response effort. The media was well coordinated and resulted in an outstanding amount of coverage.

There were also a significant number of challenges during the response effort. Initially the animals were spread out in several locations thus making communication extremely difficult. Methods on how to improve communication between sites and between agencies were discussed. Also, volunteers and stranding network members were not clearly identified and enforcement agencies had a difficult time knowing who was trained and who was not.

Suggestions were made on how to distinguish clear lines of authority and how to improve on the role of the Incident Commander. Also, once roles are identified within the incident command system, they must be followed by all participants to facilitate a safe and effective response. The need to improve triage techniques so that each animal can be tagged and assessed in an expeditious way was discussed as well. During this event, exact counts of the animals were difficult due to the fact that the animals were alive and swimming and spread out in a wide geographic area.

B. Rehabilitation

Thirty-two dolphins were taken to three different rehabilitation facilities. Twelve were successfully rehabilitated and released. One dolphin, a dependent calf, was deemed non-releasable and transferred to a public display facility. The successful rehabilitation and release of this many dolphins are unprecedented. Again, community and volunteer support during the rehabilitation stage proved to be invaluable. A significant amount of outside support from veterinarians and other rehabilitators (e.g. Sea World, Texas State Aquarium) played a large role to the success of the effort. Communications with NMFS via conference calls was mentioned as something that went well during the rehabilitation effort. Record keeping practices from all rehabilitation facilities was also noted as improved from past stranding events.

Challenges that were discussed included the role of the veterinarians and what authority they have during the rehabilitation effort. Resource capabilities were continually brought up during the rehabilitation discussion. The question was posed whether or not the rehabilitation facilities have the long-term resources available to maintain a large number of animals. There is a clear need for more trained network personnel for long-term rehabilitation and a limit to the number of animals one facility can take in. There also was discussion concerning better animal handling protocols for the stranding network members (e.g., calf rearing). NMFS noted they could not provide long-term support such as record keeping and assistance with rehabilitation efforts in the future, and that the role of NMFS stranding personnel is to coordinate stranding response efforts, oversee rehabilitation efforts, and periodically conduct site visits.

C. Release

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, not everyone was able to comment on the release section. Communication with NMFS regarding release guidelines worked smoothly in all releases. There was good resource availability (boat accessibility, assistance from USCG, FWCC). Media coverage was excellent and highlighted the success of the rehabilitation as well as efforts from the rehabilitation facilities.

Tagging preparedness could have been improved. There needs to be better clarification on who is responsible for purchasing tags and monitoring of the animals after release. Also discussed was better communication between the different facilities that are releasing animals. There was some discussion on whether or not the animals should have been released together.

IV. Conclusion

This debriefing provided valuable information that can be used towards further improvement of mass stranding response efforts in the Florida Keys. The need for ICS training and implementation, animal husbandry and care, volunteer, and law enforcement training was discussed throughout the debriefing. Also reiterated through the response section action items was the importance of following the Incident Command System structure and following orders from law enforcement agencies. A list of the action items for the agencies and the stranding network to consider are listed in the flip chart section at the end of this document. Debriefings of this type are a valuable opportunity to obtain feedback from concerned parties

and help identify concrete steps to continue to improve upon all aspects of marine mammal mass stranding response.

Summary of Flip Charts from Sub-groups

Response

What worked well?

- Group co-operation (network groups and law enforcement)
- ICS
- Mobile Command Unit
- Support from CG, FWC, County, Sanctuary, Sheriff's offices
- Continual volunteer support throughout event
- Interagency cooperation
- Effective communication (after the first 4-5 hours)
- Resources (boats/logistics) becoming available (after day 2)
- Out of state/area support (vets, supplies, etc)
- ID gear for volunteers etc. (after day 2)
- Local media communication to public of needs
- Contributions by public/commercial entities (food, blankets)

What Needs Improvement?

- Communication (devote a common VHF channel?) between stranding locations, and between agencies
- Leaders (communication to all of who the leaders are and where they can be found)
- Access to site by volunteers (ID and list confusion while trying to maintain security)
- Identifying Gear (for volunteers and agencies)
- Volunteer coordination (arrival times, logging in and out, making sure people aren't in the water too long)
- Clear communication of who has the final word regarding public safety
- Closer monitoring of public safety; ensuring that people listen to/follow safety directives
- Early identification of staging/onshore site for animal assessment & triage; ID and tracking of individual dolphins on site.
- Small boats for animal transport
- Following ICS command structure.

Action Items :

- Better trained, better prepared response group
- Continue to train personnel in ICS
- Purchase and distribute Identifying gear
- Respect command structure and law enforcement personnel
- Follow ICS
- Follow law enforcement orders
- Improve site management of personnel

Rehabilitation

What worked well?

- Multi-network participation w/ volunteer support and animal care/husbandry
- Community support (equipment, supplies, food, gear, public volunteers w/minimal training)
- Conference calls
- Support from others in marine mammal community
- Decisions were made regarding animals that were not good rehab candidates based on health assessments
- Good working relationship with NMFS
- Record keeping
- Effective cooperation between LOA holders
- NMFS support of rehab efforts
- Excellent media response

What needs improvement?

- Record-keeping
- Improved numbers of lead rescue/animal care staff
- Better policing for animal handling
- Tagging (better preparedness)
- Holding capacity
- Use other network facilities, resources, personnel
- Funding, mechanism for timely reimbursement from Prescott
- Clearly defined veterinarian authority
- Communication between stranding network and volunteers
- Law Enforcement needs to know missions of LOA holders to make better decisions
- Better identification of resource capabilities
- Sharing resources and personnel experience between facilities
- Larger number of rehab-capable facilities in network

- Media communication sometimes incorrect

Action Items:

- Address and identify carrying capacity of rehab facilities
- Improve triage + tagging prior to transport to rehab
- 1 accessible centralized contact for all LOA holders for donations and media contact
- Media contact for each rehab group should develop media response with NOAA, everyone should have the same info
- Train more LOA volunteers for rehab.

Release

What worked well?

- Tag availability
- Release process/protocols were followed / marine mammal experts consulted on release plan and unsuitable animals weeded out
- Interagency support
- Simultaneous release (equipment, pontoon boats), speed of transport
- Successful tracking of animals post-release, tags stayed on for >1 month on all releases
- Pre-release training/practice run
- Resource availability
- MMC animals were well-conditioned upon release
- Controlled media and public; made for better control w/ restrictions

What needs improvement?

- Coordination/Combine releases?
- Better communication between groups
- Access to tags and availability of tags
- Better assessment of animals that are going to be good candidates for release
- Conditioning animals pre-release.
- Access to release guidelines
- NOAA's release approval more timely
- LOAs maintaining community relations and ties even between events