



NMFS Northeast Regional Office

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## BELUGA WHALE DEATH APPEARS TO BE OF NATURAL CAUSES

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**Woods Hole, MA** – A team of marine mammal researchers examined the remains of Poco the beluga whale at a laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts last night, looking for evidence of what might have caused the young whale’s death. Poco was frequently sighted over the summer by mariners and divers in coastal waters from northerly Maine to Boston Harbor. His carcass was pulled from a marshy mudflat off South Portland on Monday morning.

NOAA Fisheries is the federal agency that authorizes and oversees responses to stranded marine mammals in U.S. waters. Poco was one of several solitary, sociable beluga whales tracked in Canada and the U.S. in recent years. Belugas typically occur in arctic and subarctic waters in groups, rather than alone.

“The lymph nodes we looked at were larger and wetter than normal,” said Dr. Larry Dunn of the Mystic Aquarium, who led the team of researchers examining the carcass. He noted that tissues surrounding the esophagus were swollen and fluid-filled, and there was likely lung involvement. “Although not conclusive, these changes were not inconsistent with infectious disease that could have caused the death,” said Dunn. Poco is believed to have died over the weekend.

Dunn was assisted by more than a dozen experts hailing from the New England Aquarium, the Cape Cod Stranding Network, and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI), and the University of New England. All of these institutions are members of the NOAA Fisheries Northeast Marine Mammal Stranding Network. Poco’s carcass was recovered by the Maine Marine Patrol and the Maine Department of Marine Resources, and transported by stranding response staff from the University of New England. The necropsy was conducted at WHOI’s Shore Laboratory. New England Aquarium led the effort over the summer to monitor Poco and educate the public about his behavior.

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“I saw nothing internally that suggested human interactions caused the death,” said Dunn, “and nothing externally that was new,” referring to several well-healed wounds on the animal likely caused by contact with boat propellers. “There was a good blubber coat,” said Dunn, stomach contents, and typical parasites, indicating that the whale was feeding and processing food well until a few days prior to death.

Samples taken from the lungs and other soft tissues will be examined for conclusive evidence of disease, and illness caused by virus or bacteria. Researchers from WHOI also took CAT scan images of the whale’s head, and discovered that the right ear of the whale was malformed, but this was not thought to be the cause of death.

Poco was first spotted in the Bay of Fundy during the Fall of 2003 off the town of Pocologan, and in U.S. waters during March of this year, off Gloucester. Since that time, nearly 150 sightings were reported, as Poco ranged from the islands of Boston Harbor to the mid-coast of Maine. The beluga whale trailed and rubbed against boats, divers, and swimmers. He was last sighted on October 30, in Saco Bay.

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