



NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center

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NOAA MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING NETWORK MONITORS BELUGA WHALE IN DELAWARE RIVER

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Brigantine, NJ - Today, an observation team from the NOAA's Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Network hopes to better assess the health and overall condition of the beluga whale presently swimming in the Delaware River, and last seen near the Burlington/Bristol Bridge in Burlington, New Jersey.

The team will include Bob Schoelkopf, director of the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine, New Jersey; Dr. Larry Dunn from Mystic Aquarium in Connecticut; and Dr. Janet Whaley of NOAA's National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Network. Dunn and Whaley are both marine animal veterinarians, and Dunn has extensive experience with beluga whales both in captivity and in the wild.

Robert Michaud, a beluga researcher in Canada, believes the whale is one he has photographed during his research on belugas in the St. Lawrence River and its estuary. Michaud made the identification by comparing photographs he has on file of a whale known as "Helis," with those taken by news media at the Delaware scene. "It is an old male first sighted as an adult in 1986 in the St. Lawrence Estuary. It has been seen regularly until 1994, then only twice in 2000 and 2003," said Michaud.

A monitoring team from the Marine Mammal Stranding Center (MMSC) has spent most of yesterday observing the beluga whale near the Burlington/Bristol Bridge.

“The whale appears to be in good condition and there are fish in the area for it to eat,” said Schoelkopf, who led the monitoring team. The MMSC is authorized to respond to stranded marine mammals by NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the federal agency that oversees responses to stranded mammals in U.S. waters.

“The most important thing right now is to get a good assessment of this beluga’s condition,” said Mendy Garron, assistant NMFS Northeast regional marine mammal stranding coordinator. “We also need to remind people to stay clear of the whale and report sightings to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center.”

NMFS will use the observation team’s assessment of the beluga’s condition to further plans for how to proceed if its condition or presence in the river creates risks to the animal or to people.

The whale was initially spotted in the Lambertson Road area of Trenton early on Tuesday. New Jersey State Police reported the sighting to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center. Center officials, with the help of New Jersey State Police and New Jersey DEP Division of Fish and Wildlife, will continue to assess the condition of the whale.

The appearance of solitary beluga whales in the mid-Atlantic is rare, but not unusual. In August 1978, a beluga was spotted in Townsend’s Inlet in Cape May County. That whale eventually left the area, but was found dead some weeks later. Last year, a beluga nicknamed “Poco” was frequently spotted along the New England coast from Boston Harbor to Downeast Maine. Poco was found dead in November 2004, **apparently from natural causes**

[http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press_release/news04.17.htm]

For more on watching this beluga responsibly and how you can help, read this.
For more on belugas, visit: <http://nmml.afsc.noaa.gov/education/cetaceans/beluga2.htm>

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