



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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Researchers Gear Up to Investigate Large Whale Deaths off Northeastern U.S.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is organizing whale researchers to respond to a series of whale deaths along the Northeastern U.S. Nearly two dozen carcass sightings have been confirmed in July and August, identified as mostly minke and humpback whales, but very little evidence has been obtained that might help determine causes for the deaths. Although species has not been confirmed for all the individuals sighted, no North Atlantic right whales have been among them.

"The numbers are elevated, but all that connects the carcasses at the moment is circumstance," said Mendy Garron, NMFS coordinator for the investigation. "These are all large whales, all spotted between July 1 and August 23, in locations from Virginia to Maine." Some of the reports are likely resightings. Officials have confirmed at least 19 are distinct from one another.

"We need to get more samples and be prepared to necropsy any large whale that fits the profile," said Katie Touhey, leader of the Cape Cod Stranding Network, a nonprofit organization that responds to marine mammal strandings under NOAA authorities along 700 miles of coastline from Cape Cod to the Rhode Island border. Touhey has been selected by NMFS as the field coordinator for the effort.

"It may be that these deaths are not related to one another, or we may be looking at something that is ongoing, with origins we need to understand," said Touhey, who was also field coordinator for a similar investigation of unexplained humpback and fin whale deaths on Georges Bank in July 2003.

A panel of experts established under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act to advise the Federal government on marine mammal health has determined that the situation meets criteria for an "unusual mortality event." This designation allows use of a contingency fund to further investigate the cause of the deaths, and makes it easier for the agency to call on a wider pool of experts for assistance. The panel, called the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events, also guides the investigation and makes the final report.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitats through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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On the Web:

NOAA Fisheries Service Northeast Region: www.nero.noaa.gov

Cape Cod Stranding Network: www.capecodstranding.net

NOAA Fisheries Service: www.nmfs.noaa.gov

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