



NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center

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Right Whale Carcass Proves Elusive

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Woods Hole, MA -- A NOAA aerial survey team looked over more than 2,000 square miles of ocean south of Cape Cod on Wednesday and Thursday, but was not able to relocate a dead North Atlantic right whale first seen floating offshore last week about 75 miles southeast of Nantucket. An at-sea team of researchers had hoped to retrieve biological samples and images that would better describe the animal, and shed light on how and why it died.

Veteran whale researcher Amy Knowlton of the New England Aquarium led the at-sea effort on Wednesday. "Sampling right whale carcasses provides information critical to our understanding of this population and the human activities that are affecting it," said Knowlton. "Unfortunately the North Atlantic Ocean is often an inhospitable place for our work during the winter months. We may never know how this animal died, or identify which individual it was."

Responses to stranded endangered large whales occur under the oversight and authorities of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) through the agency's Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Network. The Agency is assessing whether an additional search effort could yield results.

NOAA Fisheries is the federal agency charged with recovering and protecting marine life listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, including right whales. NOAA, the National

Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Currently, population estimates indicate a minimum of just 300 North Atlantic right whales, and researchers are particularly concerned about the population's status after this year's deaths of valuable calving females.

“This number of deaths is unsustainable for a population as small as that of the North Atlantic right whale, and points to the urgency of NOAA's efforts to reduce deaths related to ship strikes and entanglement,” said Dr. Richard Merrick, Chief of NOAA Fisheries' Protected Species Branch in the Northeast Fisheries Science Center.

The dead, floating whale was first sighted and reported on Thursday December 9 by a U.S. Coast Guard vessel. Knowlton was assisted at sea by Katie Touhey and Andrea Bogomolni of the Cape Cod Stranding Network, and Eric Montie and Amy Kukulya of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI). The team was aboard WHOI's coastal research vessel Tioga under skipper Ken Houlter. The NOAA Fisheries aerial survey was led by Misty Niemeyer and Brenda Rone, aboard a whale survey aircraft operated by NOAA's Office of Marine and Aviation Operations.

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NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to providing and preserving the nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries 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.

NOAA 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.

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