



NMFS Northeast Fisheries Science Center

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Contact:
Teri Frady
NOAA Fisheries
508 495-2239

Sheila Dean
Co-Director
Marine Mammal
Stranding Center
609 266-0538

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Beluga Whale Returns to Delaware River

Gloucester, MA – Helis the beluga whale has returned to the Delaware River, sighted last evening around Burlington Island. Officials with NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the federal agency responsible for protecting marine mammals like Helis, are planning for the worst and hoping for the best.

“Experts have had some time to study images of Helis from the week of April 11. They say he is thin, which could indicate illness or might be because of molting,” said Dana Hartley, who is coordinating the stranding response for NMFS’ Northeast Stranding Response Network. Belugas shed their outer layer of skin annually, and during the molt are under some physiological stress and may lose some weight. “Still,” said Hartley, “we can’t rule out the possibility that his health is failing.”

NOAA’s NMFS is the federal agency charged with recovering and protecting marine mammals like Helis in U.S. waters. The Agency operates the National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Network, which comprises numerous partner institutions and organizations that provide first response, rehabilitation, and monitoring for stranded marine mammals.

Helis is from the St. Lawrence River beluga population in Northeastern Canada. He spent about a week in the upper Delaware River between Trenton and Philadelphia during the week of April 11, headed south on April 17, and was spotted in the middle of Delaware Bay on April 18.

No further sightings were reported until last Saturday, when a report placed him near the Walt Whitman Bridge, again headed south. On Wednesday, the U.S. Coast Guard received two reports of Helis sightings in the Schuylkill River. Philadelphia police marine units and news media footage confirmed Helis was nearing the Gray's Ferry Bridge during Wednesday evening and near the mouth of the river by Thursday afternoon.

"Helis is an old beluga, 27 to 30 years of age, and his best chances lie with letting nature take its course," said Dr. Janet Whaley, who manages the NMFS National Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Network. Whaley is a marine veterinarian and observed the beluga earlier this month. "We've ruled out a live capture for now, since his age, size, and generally elusive behavior make that difficult, dangerous, and probably unlikely to succeed."

Rather, says Hartley, the agency is planning for a response if Helis strands. "We will certainly be prepared to move him to rehabilitation if he strands alive and is in reasonable condition, but there are significant risks and he may not survive."

Sightings should be called in to the Marine Mammal Stranding Center in Brigantine, New Jersey at 609-266-0538; or, if you are a mariner, report the sighting to the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF Channel 16.

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NOAA/National Marine Fisheries Service * One Blackburn Drive * Gloucester, MA * 01930