

DECISION TREE FOR LIVE STRANDED CETACEANS

Mission Statement of the National Stranding Network: To carry out the mandates of Title IV of the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The purposes of Title IV of the MMPA include: facilitation of collection and dissemination of reference data on the health of marine mammals and health trends of marine mammal populations in the wild; correlation of the health of marine mammals and marine mammal populations in the wild with available data on physical, chemical, and biological environmental parameters; and coordination of effective responses to unusual mortality events.

Objectives of the SEUS marine mammal stranding network

- To carry out the mandates of Title IV of the MMPA
- To provide for the protection, welfare, and humane treatment (including euthanasia when appropriate) of live stranded marine mammals
- To gain the maximum amount of scientific information from stranded marine mammals
- To ensure consistent data collection through the development of standardized protocols and training workshops
- To achieve real time reporting for the early detection of anomalous events
- Foster communication and feedback with the stranding network volunteers

Role of First Responder

- 1) Phone call comes in to notify of live stranded animal
- 2) Stranding network sends first responder (volunteer or designee of LOA holder experienced in marine mammal strandings) directly to scene to assess the situation.
- 3) The first responder will advise LOA holder and NMFS of the number of animals, condition of animal(s), environmental conditions, and equipment needs.
- 4) First responder stays with animal and acts as on-site coordinator until second responders arrive (coordinator coordinates with local authorities on the beach as well and beachgoers).
- 5) NMFS is notified.

Role of second (main – LOA holder and NMFS) responder

- 1) Once main responder and others arrive on scene, he or she will act as new on-site coordinator (if necessary) and will take charge of the event and ensure that care is being given and that the animal is humanely treated.
- 2) The on-site coordinator will then address the following questions.
 - Is logistic support available?
 - What are the environmental conditions (sea state, beach conditions, and accessibility)?
 - What is the animal's condition (animal health, time since stranding-time on beach, age)?
 - Ease of handling (size of animal)?
 - Are there care facilities available and how far away are they?
- 3) Once the answers of these questions are determined the on-site coordinator will immediately call the NMFS Regional Stranding Coordinator.
- 4) The NMFS Regional Stranding Coordinator will then make the final decision on the disposition of the live stranded marine mammal(s) relying heavily on the expertise and opinion of the on-site coordinator and the veterinary assessment.

Responsibility of the stranding coordinator during a live stranding

- To facilitate rapid response
- Contact local, state and federal authorities e.g.,
- Evaluate the situation
- Provide guidance to the responders on scene
- Assist in providing emergency care
- Provide support to the network as necessary
- Determine proper animal care facility if taken into rehab
- Take no action that will prolong suffering of the animal(s)

DISPOSITION OF LIVE STRANDED MARINE MAMMALS – all decisions are made in consultation with NMFS and a stranding network veterinarian

Immediate Release is an Option when:

- The animal is manageable and logistic support is adequate
- Beach and environmental conditions are favorable
- The animal is healthy and able to function normally as determined by the on-site coordinator and a stranding network veterinarian
- Social requirements can be met (e.g., maternal care for young)
- The area of release is the natural habitat of the animal(s)
- The animal has been tagged if possible according to NMFS protocol

*Single stranded cetaceans are usually **POOR** candidates for immediate release, *Marine Mammals Ashore* J. Geraci and V. Lounsbury 1993.

Rehabilitation is an Option when:

- NMFS approved facilities are available and equipped for the species and number of animals involved
- Arrangements can be made for safe and expeditious transport
- There are sufficient funds and staff to provide care for a reasonable amount of time
- There is a good chance the animal can be restored to health

Euthanasia is an option when:

- It is necessary to end the suffering of an animal in irreversibly poor condition
- The decision can be made and the action directed by an experienced stranding network member in consultation with the stranding network veterinarian
- Essential materials and equipment are available for humane euthanasia
- The procedure can be carried out humanely
- No rehabilitation facilities are available and the animal is suffering or unlikely to survive if released

Things to keep in mind

- It is not always possible to judge the health of a cetacean by its outward appearance therefore veterinary assessment is important to make decisions during triage situation.
- Every live stranded cetacean is evaluated on a case by case basis weighing in all factors of the situation.