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NOAA TEAM PLANS FRIDAY ATTEMPT TO REMOVE ROPES FROM ENDANGERED RIGHT WHALE NOAA Divers Join the Disentanglement Team

Wilmington, N.C. – The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) and their rescue team partners are planning to disentangle rope and buoys from the juvenile male endangered right whale tomorrow with the help of expert divers from NOAA and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. It is the first time divers have been used in a whale disentanglement operation. The whale is off North Carolina's south coast and traveling quickly. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"We are cautiously optimistic about saving this whale," said Dr. Teri Rowles, lead veterinarian for NOAA Fisheries and the head of the nation's Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. "We have assembled some of the best scientists and experts in the world in this effort, and we are going to give it another try tomorrow. We are pleased that the dive team may be able to help."

"NOAA divers are highly trained to operate under adverse conditions and have the skills and experience to do a variety of complicated tasks," said Dave Dinsmore, director of the NOAA Diving Program and Diving Center in Seattle, Wash. "The divers will join the disentanglement team tonight. The NOAA dive supervisor will wait to see the whale and assess sea conditions before he decides whether it's safe to send divers in to attempt to cut ropes."

If weather permits, the team will locate the whale and attempt to remove as much rope and gear as they can. The team plans to sedate the whale to slow its movement and use specially constructed tools to try to remove the lines and the buoys that are wrapped around the whale's body. Disentangling gear from a whale is dangerous and unpredictable because of the animal's size and potential volatility.

NOAA's Steve Urick is a senior dive supervisor and will direct all diving operations. Ulrick and three other NOAA divers are on the team, as well as three divers from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington.

Other members of the disentanglement team include disentanglement and whale experts from the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown, Mass., the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The university's research vessel, *Cape Fear*, is being used for this segment of the disentanglement effort.

"UNC Wilmington is pleased to provide local knowledge of where these animals are found as well, as logistical support to attempt this disentanglement effort off southeastern North Carolina," said Bill McLellan, research associate and head of the UNCW Marine Mammal Stranding Program.

On March 17, the disentanglement team attached a satellite tracking device to the whale off Anastasia Island, Fla. On March 18, the whale was relocated off the coast of Jacksonville, Fla., with the help of the NOAA Twin Otter aircraft surveillance team. Since that time, it has been steadily traveling north.

The North Atlantic right whale is the most endangered off American coasts. After a period of intense whaling in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was on the brink of extinction. Although whaling practices have ceased, right whales face serious risks from ship collisions and entanglements in fishing gear and marine debris. The North Atlantic right whale population is now estimated to be approximately 300 animals and is listed as "Endangered" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973. Right whales and all other species of marine mammals are also protected under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our 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. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.