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NOAA Team Plans Whale Disentanglement Attempt
Rare Endangered Right Whale Caught in Ropes & Buoys

Savannah, Ga. - NOAA and its rescue team partners are off the South Carolina coast attempting to relocate a young endangered right whale entangled in ropes and buoys. The team is planning a rescue attempt to remove the ropes on Friday. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

“This is a severe entanglement involving ropes wrapped tightly around the head of a young whale that is still growing. We do not know at this time whether one or both of its flippers are involved. These type of head and flipper wraps are the hardest disentanglements to attempt,” said Dr. Teri Rowles, lead veterinarian for NOAA Fisheries and the director of the nation’s Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. “We have assembled some of the best marine mammal scientists and experts in the world in this effort. We will try to cut the tight lines around the head, and remove as much of the rope and gear as we possibly can with our current technology.”

The team plans to relocate the whale, assess the entanglement and the animal’s health, and finalize a rope and gear removal plan. If possible, they will attempt to remove as much rope and gear as possible on Friday. The team will use specially constructed tools to try to remove the lines and other gear. Rescue team members are concerned about the dangers associated with disentanglements. Sea conditions are rough and opportunities to disentangle the animal may be infrequent. The team does not expect it will be able to completely disentangle the whale, but it may survive if most of the restricting lines are freed and the weight is removed.

(More)

Members of the rescue team include disentanglement and whale experts from the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown, Mass., the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Duke University, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the U.S. Coast Guard and NOAA Fisheries. Many team members are veterans of previous disentanglement efforts. The Coast Guards cutter, *Yellowfin*, is being used for this segment of the disentanglement effort. The Coast Guard is also providing aerial support.

“Our hope is to make several cuts to reduce the amount of strain on the animal,” says Dr. Charles "Stormy" Mayo, Senior Scientist at the Center for Coastal Studies, who pioneered whale disentanglement methods over 20 years ago and now works under a federal contract overseen by NOAA Fisheries. “We need to reduce the amount of weight this mammal is carrying, including the hundreds of feet of fishing line which we believe is weighed down by additional gear we cannot see at the water line.”

The whale was first reported as entangled on December 6 off the coast of North Carolina. On December 21, a shipboard team relocated the whale off the coast of Georgia with the help of the Wildlife Trust Aerial surveillance team aboard a NOAA aircraft. The team attached a telemetry buoy to the trailing gear to track the whale’s position. The whale initially headed south to Jacksonville, Fla., but then turned around and has been 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 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.

Media Note: B-roll is available (digital 8 and mini dv format). Photos can be downloaded from: <http://coastalstudies.org/>

<http://www.coastalstudies.org/what-we-do/whale-rescue/latest-disentanglement>

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/>

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