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NOAA ASSEMBLES RESCUE TEAM TO SEDATE WHALE, CUT LINE
Endangered Right Whale Still Within Reach of Medical Help

Charleston, S.C. – Veterinarians and whale experts from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) are coordinating a rescue team that will attempt an at-sea removal of entangled ropes and buoys from a moving endangered North Atlantic right whale currently off the coast of Charleston, S.C. Left alone, the entangled lines may prove lethal. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

“If we do not remove the lines, this whale will die,” said Dr. Teri Rowles, lead veterinarian for NOAA Fisheries and the head of the nation’s Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. “Although we’ve only attempted this type of rescue once before, we feel that it’s critical to try. Every member of this rare and endangered species population that dies affects the chance of survival for the entire species.”

The team plans to use sedation and specially constructed tools to remove the lines and the buoys that are wrapped around the whale’s body. Members of the same team unsuccessfully tried a similar rescue in July 2001 off the coast of Cape Cod, Mass. That whale never slowed long enough for ropes to be cut. The team eventually lost track of the whale in bad weather and its status is unknown.

Other members of the Charleston team include disentanglement and whale experts from the Center for Coastal Studies in Provincetown, Mass., and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Logistical support is being provided by the U.S. Coast Guard and its crew of the 87-foot Coast Guard Cutter Yellowfin.

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“As the Department of Homeland Security maritime law enforcement agency charged with enforcing The Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Coast Guard welcomes the opportunity to help save one of 300 North Atlantic right whales in the world,” said Lt. Randall Brown, Coast Guard Group Charleston, operations officer.

Team members recently attached a satellite tracking device, which is providing information on the whale’s position. On March 19, the team located the whale and was able to remove some of the lines, reducing the drag on the whale. Since that time, the whale has been steadily traveling north.

The team will first use sedatives to slow the whale, then buoys and harnesses to stabilize it before attempting to cut the heavy lines and other items from its body. The team also will take blood and blubber samples to assess the whale’s overall health and reattach the tracking device to monitor its location. The plan is weather contingent.

This species of whale is the most endangered off American coasts. After a period of intense whaling in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the right whale 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.