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NOAA CONTINUES TO INVESTIGATE SEAL DEATHS IN NEW ENGLAND

Reward Offered for the Arrest and Conviction of Poachers

Special agents with NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement (OLE) continue to investigate the deaths of four seals in New England confirmed to be caused by human interaction and showed signs of poaching for body parts. A reward of \$11,400 for the arrest and conviction of those responsible has been offered by private organizations in New England. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

"Harming a seal is a violation of the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act," said Deputy Special Agent-in-Charge Andy Cohen, OLE - Northeast Division. "It is also illegal to remove parts from a seal, dead or alive, or trade those parts unless you have a specifically granted right to do so."

Since July 2003, NOAA special agents have spotted, photographed and taken reports of a number of dead seals found along the New England coast, most of which likely died of natural causes. Investigating agents say four seal carcasses were confirmed to have human-caused wounds, such as skinning, decapitation, and other missing body parts. These include two recovered in Hampton Beach, N.H., last summer and two recovered in Plymouth, Mass., in January and February.

A fifth seal, found headless in Wells, Maine, is being investigated as a suspicious death, although a necropsy was never performed due to the high level of decomposition of the carcass. Biologists confirmed that the seal recently found headless on a beach in Rye, N.H., died of natural causes.

Seals found in New England are not threatened or endangered.

A reward of \$11,400 is being offered by private sources for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for this federal violation. Anyone with information is urged to call NOAA's anonymous tip line at (800) 853-1964.

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Rewards have been offered by Margarita's Restaurants, Humane Society USA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Coastal Conservation Association, Smuttynose Brewery, Hampton (N.H.) Crimeline, Tucker Construction Company, Gaslight Restaurant, Dawley Construction Company and Granite State Whale Watch.

Stranded seals in New England, dead or alive, should also be reported to the NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal and Sea Turtle Stranding Response Network. In southern Maine, call Marine Animal Lifeline at (207) 851-6625. For New Hampshire and south to Cape Cod, call the New England Aquarium at (617) 973-5247. For Cape Cod, call the Cape Cod Stranding Network at (508) 743-9548.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 (MMPA) protects seals and other marine mammals from harassment - which includes attempt to feed, shoot or approach within 50 feet. Civil penalties of up to \$12,000 and criminal fines of up to \$20,000 as well as imprisonment may be levied against those that violate the MMPA.

NOAA's Office for Law Enforcement is working in concert with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Hampshire, U.S. Coast Guard, New Hampshire Fish & Game Department, Law Enforcement Division, New Hampshire Marine Patrol, Massachusetts Environmental Police, and the Maine Marine Patrol to solve these crimes.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

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On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>