

Northern Pinnipeds (Ice Seals and Walruses)



Update: Unusual Mortality Event (UME) Investigation and Findings

February 1, 2012



Ringed seal with flipper lesions. Photo courtesy of North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management.

Recent Reports

We've received few reports of sick seals in Alaska since the end of November. In early January, three ringed seals were harvested in the North Slope Borough that had complete hair coats but very mild nodular lesions on their flippers that may suggest the disease is still present (otherwise the seals appeared healthy). Chukotka hunters didn't report any sightings or harvest of sick and/or hairless seals in December 2011 and January 2012. There have been no additional reports of sick walruses during this time period.

It should be noted that weather conditions have been largely unsuitable for making observations in the Arctic and Bering Strait region during this time period. We're hoping that with the arrival of spring there will be more opportunities for hunters to make observations and report any seals or walruses that appear sick or are acting abnormally.

What else has happened since November?

In December, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) declared the current pinniped Arctic disease event a multi-species **Unusual Mortality Event (UME)**. With this UME declaration, the investigative team (which includes national and international specialists from numerous laboratories, agencies, and institutions) will have access to additional resources to aid the disease investigation (e.g., the Marine Mammal UME Fund).

Since species impacted by the Alaska UME include ice seals (under the jurisdiction of NMFS) and walruses (under the jurisdiction of USFWS), both agencies are working together closely to help oversee the investigation. The agencies have jointly appointed Dr. Raphaela Stimmelmayer from the North Slope Borough to be the UME On-site Coordinator and lead the investigation. Each agency has also assigned an Off-site Coordinator to serve a communication and coordination role as the investigation moves forward: Joel Garlich-Miller (USFWS) and Aleria Jensen (NMFS). Dr. Stephen Raverty will serve as the liaison to the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events (WGMMUME).

A **UME** is defined under the Marine Mammal Protection Act as "a stranding that is unexpected; involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response."

From 1991 to the present, there have been 55 formally recognized UMEs in the U.S.

For more information on UMEs: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/>

What's Being Done

An investigative team has been established. The investigation continues to be a highly collaborative effort. Sampled tissues have so far tested negative for the more common illnesses known to affect marine mammals. Laboratory testing continues for bacterial, viral, fungal, or toxic agents which may be responsible for the condition and results will be shared as soon as they become available.

A workshop held at the Alaska Marine Science Symposium in Anchorage in mid-January generated strategies for moving forward with the UME investigation. The workshop was well-attended by a wide variety of involved and concerned parties, including Tribal leaders, hunters, scientists, veterinarians, wildlife biologists, and disease diagnosticians from Alaska and beyond. It was extremely productive as a forum for information exchange, as well as developing next steps for field protocols, diagnostics, and communications.

A communication team was established as a result of this symposium to get timely updates out to communities and hunters. We are compiling a list of frequently asked questions that will be updated and shared with communities as answers become available.

Food Safety Concerns

This is the first UME involving subsistence species in coastal Alaskan communities. The agencies have been working closely with the State of Alaska Division of Public Health to assess potential risk and distribute general precautionary guidelines around handling and consumption in the absence of a known pathogen. Throughout this event, hunters have been encouraged to use traditional and customary practices when dealing with healthy and/or sick seals.

At present there is no evidence that consuming animals involved in this UME has caused any human illness. The Alaska Division of Public Health has issued the following health precautions for interacting with any wild animal:

- *Do not eat any animals that appear sick or diseased*
- *Do not allow dogs to interact with or feed on sick animals*
- *Wearing rubber gloves can reduce exposure to potential infectious agents while butchering or handling*
- *Thoroughly washing your hands and equipment will reduce disease transmission risk*
- *While cooking is a personal choice/preference, it can help kill parasites and bacteria in raw meat*
- *If you feel sick, contact your local health care provider immediately*

If you find a seal or walrus acting abnormally or showing signs of illness, note its location and contact your local wildlife authority as soon as possible.



A sickened ringed seal found near Barrow, Alaska, in 2011. Photo courtesy of North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management.

For more background on this event, updates, regional contacts, and how to help, see:

<http://alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice/diseased/default.htm>

http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/disease_investigation.htm