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Scientists Launch Investigation into Dolphin Strandings near Jacksonville, FL

NOAA Fisheries Service and partners have launched an investigation into the strandings of at least 19 dead Atlantic bottlenose dolphins in the St. Johns River near Jacksonville, FL. A team of biologists and pathologists from NOAA and partner organizations will examine the potential causes of the mortalities, 16 of which occurred between July and September 2010.

In an average year, the St. Johns River experiences between two to six dolphin strandings. The high number of animals found dead this summer prompted NOAA Fisheries and its marine mammal stranding network partners to consult with a congressionally mandated group of marine mammal experts. The group determined the strandings meet the criteria for an Unusual Mortality Event and provided guidance for the multiagency investigation.

"It is important that we rigorously investigate marine mammal Unusual Mortality Events because they can provide critical information about the health of the animals and their environment," said Roy Crabtree, NOAA Fisheries' southeast regional administrator. "Understanding these events may provide insight into larger environmental issues which could have implications for human health and welfare."

Some causes of previous Unusual Mortality Events around the coastal United States have included: infections or disease; biotoxins, such as red tides; human interactions; and malnutrition. The majority of the St. Johns River dolphin strandings occurred in the northern portion of the river near Jacksonville, FL, in an area which experienced elevated fish mortalities between May and July 2010.

NOAA Fisheries has organized an investigation team to identify the environmental, chemical, and physical factors that may have contributed to the mortalities. Scientists will analyze tissue samples taken from the stranded animals, and monitor existing dolphin populations in the St. Johns River for signs of illness or disturbance.

Members of the public may report injured or stranded marine mammals to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission marine mammal stranding hotline at 888-404-3922

Since 1991, 51 Unusual Mortality Events have been declared in the United States, involving various species and ranging from dozens to hundreds of marine mammals per event. The state of Florida has experienced several UMEs, most of which have involved bottlenose dolphins or manatees.

To investigate the dolphin UME, NOAA Fisheries is working with partners from Jacksonville University, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Aquarium's Dolphin Conservation Field Station at

Marineland, Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute, Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute, the St. John's River Water Management District, the Jacksonville Zoo, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

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NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region: <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/>

NOAA Fisheries Unusual Mortality Events: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/>