

The Marine Mammal Center to Examine 70 Foot Whale Found Off Marin Coast

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 18, 2002

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Stranding Dept/TMMC 415.289.7350

Joe Cordaro/NMFS 562.980.4017

The Marine Mammal Center to Examine 70-Foot Whale Found Off Marin Coast



The Marine Mammal Center is leading efforts to examine a dead 70-foot whale spotted off the Marin coastline Tuesday evening. The whale was floating just inside the November buoy (Marin County coastline). The Marine Mammal Center is part of the Northern California Whale Necropsy Team, operating under authorization from the National Marine Fisheries Service, to investigate stranded whales. As such, The Center will coordinate the landing of the carcass if conditions permit, respond to the landing of the carcass if it drifts onto a beach with the currents, and work with the Necropsy Team to perform the forensic examination on the whale. As a private, non-profit organization, The Center holds a letter of authorization from the National Marine Fisheries Service and a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service authorizing The Center to rescue and rehabilitate marine mammals, as well as to examine dead marine mammals. NMFS encourages the

public to report any sick or injured marine mammals to their local stranding organization or to NMFS.

Dr. Frances Gulland, Director of Veterinary Science at The Marine Mammal Center, will lead The Center's efforts. An attempt was made to rope the carcass in an effort to tow it to shore Wednesday evening, but this effort was aborted when a white shark was discovered feeding on the carcass. White sharks use the waters off of the Marin coast, and in particular around the Farallon Islands, as feeding grounds. Although the sharks' most common prey are seals and sea lions, dead whales are also a source of food. Dr. Gulland observed the carcass from the boat and noted four large propeller wounds that suggest that death may have been caused by a boat strike. "Our goal is to conduct a full necropsy, but at this time we suspect a boat strike may have contributed to the death. There may be other factors as well, and we will need to conduct a necropsy to reveal other possible conditions that might, for example, have predisposed the whale to being hit, rendering it unable to move away from the path of the ship." As of Thursday afternoon, conditions do not permit another attempt at towing and it appears that the currents may be pushing the carcass towards the coastline, which may lead to a natural landing.

The whale appears to be a blue whale, a baleen whale that is the world's largest living animal. Because the whale was partially submerged, definitive species identification will occur when the whale is examined. Listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 1991 due to historic over-harvesting, the blue whale is also protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The world population of blue whales is 7,000-10,000 with 2,000 of these whales found in California. The California population has been noted to be growing and is the highest population in the world. Hypotheses include that more blue whales may be using California waters for their feeding grounds. Historical records show that in the past, blue whales did not frequent California waters. In California, they range between the Farallones, Cordell Bank, Monterey Bay, and the Channel Islands where they feed on krill during the summer and fall and then migrate south to Mexico and as far as Costa Rica in winter and spring to breed. Adult blue whales weigh about one ton per foot and can reach over 100 feet.

The Marine Mammal Center, a non-profit hospital dedicated to the care of wild marine mammals, rescues and rehabilitates marine mammals that strand ill, injured or orphaned along 600 miles of northern and central California coastline. Since 1975, over 9,000 marine mammals have received a second chance at life and thousands have been successfully released back to their wild ocean home. The Center uniquely combines its rehabilitation program with scientific discovery and education programs to advance our understanding of marine mammal health, ocean health and promote conservation. The year 2002 marks The Center's 27th year of conserving marine mammals and their habitat.

For More Information:

<http://www.marinemammalcenter.org/learning/education/whales/blue.asp>

<http://ecos.fws.gov/servlet/SpeciesProfile?spcode=A02M>

##END##