



The Marine
Mammal Center

News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER CONDUCTS LEPTOSPIROSIS STUDY AS SEASONAL ILLNESS PEAKS IN CALIFORNIA SEA LIONS ALONG THE COAST

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – October 22, 2008) The Marine Mammal Center is seeing a large number of leptospirosis cases in California sea lions this year and is leading a study to determine when and why the sea lions contract this disease. Every four to five years, the Center sees a surge in the number of sea lions admitted as a result of this bacterial infection that affects the kidneys and can be lethal for patients. The current research will focus on the factors contributing to these cycles of disease so that scientists will have an understanding of how the disease spreads and what the risks are to sea lions and other animals. Recently, the Center began taking blood samples, tagging, and releasing wild juvenile California sea lions in the Bay Area as part of the new research study.

“The blood samples our team will collect from wild California sea lions will help them determine kidney function and exposure rates among these animals,” said Dr. Jeffrey Boehm, Executive Director at The Marine Mammal Center. “The data will also help us understand more about the susceptibility of sea lions in the population during an epidemic and clarify the relationship between the stranded sea lions with leptospirosis we see here at the Center and those that are susceptible in the population.”

Leptospirosis epidemics were first documented in California sea lions in the early 1970s and are caused by spiral shaped bacteria called leptospire. Many different animal species, including humans, carry the bacterium which can leech into water or soil and survive there for weeks to months. Humans and animals can become infected through contact with contaminated urine, water, or soil. If not treated, the patient can develop kidney damage, meningitis, liver failure, and respiratory distress. The Marine Mammal Center advises beach goers and their dogs to stay away from marine mammals they may encounter on beaches and to call the Center’s 24-hour response line at (415) 289-SEAL should they come across any marine mammal in distress.

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Collaborators in this new study include the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, University of California Los Angeles, University of California at Davis, Penn State University and the National Animal Disease Center in Ames, Iowa.

High resolution photos of trained personnel from The Marine Mammal Center performing blood draws for this study are available upon request. Please contact Jim Oswald at (415) 289-7341, oswaldj@tmmc.org for more information.

About The Marine Mammal Center:

Headquartered in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in Sausalito, California, The Marine Mammal Center is a nonprofit veterinary hospital, research and educational center dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of ill and injured marine mammals - primarily elephant seals, harbor seals and California sea lions - and to the study of their health. Patients that become healthy again are released back to the ocean. Since 1975, the Center has rescued and treated more than 13,000 marine mammals and has accumulated a body of knowledge about marine mammal and ocean health from its patients. By educating the public about marine mammals, the Center hopes to foster ocean stewardship and conservation. For more information, visit www.marinemammalcenter.org

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