

Deadly virus may have killed beached dolphin

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A bottlenose dolphin that stranded and died on Ormond Beach Friday morning may have been the latest victim of a measles-like virus blamed for hundreds of dolphin deaths along the Atlantic Coast between New York and Florida since last summer.

Volusia County Beach Safety and Ocean Rescue officers and others help keep a dolphin wet in Ormond Beach after it beached itself Friday morning.

Volusia County Beach Safety and Ocean Rescue

The dolphin was found on the beach just before 9 a.m., said Capt. Tammy Marris, spokeswoman for Volusia County Beach Safety and Ocean Rescue.

Beachgoers and beach safety employees tried to keep the dolphin wet and secured until a veterinarian and rescue team from **Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute** could respond.

However, the dolphin died just before the veterinarian arrived, said Blair Mase, marine mammal stranding coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in the Southeast. Hubbs researchers conducted a necropsy on the dolphin later on Friday and will work to try to determine whether the death is related to the others along the coast, Mase said.

“We are treating it as if this was the case,” she said. Dolphins infected by the virus tend to die very quickly after stranding.

Between July 1, 2013 and March 16, 2014, at least 1,175 dolphins have been found dead between New York and Florida. The average over that same time period for the previous five years was 169.

That’s just three less than the total 172 dolphins found between the state line and Brevard County since last summer, according to NOAA Fisheries’ records.

Of those deaths, 25 were in Volusia County as of Jan. 27, the latest date for which figures were available. That includes 18 on the coast and seven in inland waterways such as the Halifax River and Indian River Lagoon. Four dolphins have been recovered on Flagler beaches.

The morbillivirus is a measles-like virus that strikes mammals, including cattle, sheep and wolves. Five types of the virus are found in marine mammals, including whales, seals and sea otters, NOAA officials said.



Of the total deaths, at least 200 dolphins tested positive for the morbillivirus, including 21 in Florida.

The last confirmed dolphin that tested positive in Florida was on Feb. 27, Mase said. NOAA is still awaiting results on a dolphin necropsied in March, she said.

Now that the waters are warming and dolphins are migrating northward again, Mase expects to see the number of dolphin deaths dwindle along the Florida coast, probably winding down between April and May, she said.

In general, the virus outbreak in Florida over the winter wasn't as bad as officials had feared. "We were bracing for the worst," Mase said. But they didn't encounter any situations where the existing marine mammal stranding network couldn't respond to all the animals and had to bring in outside help. "It wasn't as bad as we planned for," she said.

The virus also didn't appear to impact any of the dolphins within the Indian River Lagoon populations, which was a "very good thing," Mase said. The lagoon dolphins already were being impacted by a separate stream of troubles plaguing the lagoon system. In total 83 dolphins have died there since 2012, Mase said, the result of a mysterious malady that NOAA researchers and others haven't yet been able to pinpoint.

Meanwhile, a lot of work is going into researching the impact the virus is having on the Atlantic migratory dolphin population, Mase said. Scientists also are trying to learn more about the particular strain of virus, she said.

NOAA will be looking at whether any additional protections need to be implemented for the dolphins, she said, "to make sure they can bounce back."

Staff Writer Lyda Longa contributed to this report.