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Dolphin Virus Adds To Deaths In Troubled Florida Lagoon



BY BARBARA LISTON, REUTERS

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By Barbara Liston

ORLANDO Fla. (Reuters) - A measles-like virus that is blamed for killing hundreds of dolphins on the U.S. East Coast has spread into a Florida lagoon where hundreds of manatees, brown pelicans and dolphins already died mysteriously in recent years.

The Indian River Lagoon, south of the Kennedy Space Center, was the scene of the unexplained deaths in 2012 and 2013 and is now threatened by cetacean morbillivirus, which is related to the virus that causes measles in humans.

Megan Stolen, a research scientist from the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute, said on Tuesday that the disease was new to Florida's Intercoastal Waterway, which includes the Indian River Lagoon, but that the deaths appear to be over.

She said 14 dead dolphins, including nine calves, had been found in August north of Kennedy Space Center and that another four dolphins were found dead on a nearby beach.

"This is a sheltered population and we're concerned that this new virus is infecting animals that have not been exposed to it in the past," Stolen said.

Stolen said some of the deaths were confirmed as a result of morbillivirus. Other cases, in which the bodies were too decayed to test, are suspected, she said.

Dolphin deaths that appear to have been caused by the morbillivirus have been reported as far north as Jacksonville, she said.

Morbillivirus attacks dolphins' immune systems, leaving infected animals thin and vulnerable to other diseases, including pneumonia.

Stolen said that kill-off might have weakened the animal population and that August is prime time for the birth of calves, which have not built up an immunity.

(Reporting by Barbara Liston; Editing by Daniel Wallis and Bill Trott)

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