

Beached Brevard whale had heart illness, rope inside



Jim Wavmer, FLORIDA TODAY 7:24 a.m. EDT May 19, 2015



Pygmy sperm whale beaches in South Brevard. Video by Megan Stolen, Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute. Posted 5-18-15.

Monday's was one of three recent whale to beach themselves in the region in the past few weeks, but the deaths are not considered related.



(Photo: Tim Shortt/FLORIDA TODAY)

Biologists suspect severe heart disease, coupled with 10 feet of rope and piece of a plastic bag in its stomach, caused a 10-foot pygmy sperm whale to beach itself Monday at Spessard Holland Park.

"It's really, really sick," Megan Stolen, a research scientist with the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute, said shortly before the whale was euthanized. "It's very, very skinny."

The whale showed signs of severe heart disease, Stolen said.

But biologists plan to examine the whale's remains to test for the so-called morbillivirus. They'll test whether that measles-like virus, which killed more than 1,600 dolphins since July 2013, also contributed to the pygmy

sperm whale's death.

The virus has been killing bottlenose dolphins along the Atlantic Coast for more than two years in the worst outbreak of the virus in almost three decades.

The virus claimed 740 dolphins from New Jersey to Florida in 1987.

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On May 7, Hubbs researchers received a report from Canaveral National Seashore staff that the whale had stranded alive on the beach within the national park.

whale washed out for a while but then washed back onto the beach at Kennedy Space Center.

Hubbs staff euthanized that whale, too. Whales rarely survive beaching. But NOAA Fisheries also mandates all whales and dolphins that beach during a morbillivirus outbreak must be euthanized to prevent spread of the virus.

The dolphins infected with the virus wash up with lesions on their skin, mouth, joints, or lungs.

Since July 2013, the virus has killed more than 1,660 bottlenose dolphins, from New Jersey to Brevard, more than 300 of them in the Florida, according to NOAA Fisheries.

Stolen said about 30 dead bottlenose dolphins in the Indian River Lagoon region have tested positive for the virus. But as many as 100 in the region may have died from the virus, the Hubbs researchers suspect.

If tests continue to show no morbillivirus infections, NOAA Fisheries may soon consider declaring a formal end to the unusual die-off, Hubbs officials said earlier this month. That would also end the mandatory euthanizing of the stranded dolphins and whales.

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Teams work to relieve pygmy whale that beached Monday morning at Spessard Holland Park in south Brevard. Video by Tim Shortt/FLORIDA TODAY. Posted 5-18-15.

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