



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
*National Marine Fisheries Service*  
P.O. Box 21668  
Juneau, AK 99802-1668

May 26, 2023

Greetings Nome Officials and Community Members,

In an effort to enhance coordination and communication among agencies and organizations involved in marine mammal stranding response, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) would like to provide you with an update on the resources and personnel authorized to respond to stranded marine mammals in the Bering Strait Region and the community of Nome.

The National Marine Mammal Stranding Network consists of over 100 organizations partnered with NMFS to investigate marine mammal strandings. These stranding networks are established in all coastal states and are authorized through Stranding Agreements from NMFS regional offices. In Nome, the Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program holds the local Stranding Agreement authorization (SA-AKR-2022-10) from NMFS to serve as first responder and coordinator during stranding events involving NOAA trust species.

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) Section 410(6), a stranding is defined as an event in the wild in which:

- a) a marine mammal is dead and is on a beach or shore of the United States; or in waters under the jurisdiction of the United States (including any navigable waters); or
- b) a marine mammal is alive and is on a beach or shore of the United States and unable to return to the water; on a beach or shore of the United States and, although able to return to the water, is in need of apparent medical attention; or in the waters under the jurisdiction of the United States (including any navigable waters), but is unable to return to its natural habitat under its own power or without assistance. 16 U.S.C. 1421h (6).

Given the changing environmental conditions in the Bering Strait Region, there appears to be a growing number of reports of seals on shore classified as stranded that may require relocation. In these situations, or other cases of marine mammals in distress, NMFS directs agencies, organizations, or members of the public to work through the local Stranding Agreement holder, the Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program, to report incidents. The authorized point of contact for the Bering Strait Region is Gay Sheffield, (907) 443-2397 or [ggsheffield@alaska.edu](mailto:ggsheffield@alaska.edu). In addition, Charles "Chuck" Menadelook (Subsistence Program Kawerak, Inc., [CbMenadelook@kawerak.org](mailto:CbMenadelook@kawerak.org)) or Brandon Ahmasuk (Kawerak, Inc., [bahmasuk@kawerak.org](mailto:bahmasuk@kawerak.org)) serve as additional points of contact for reporting and responding to marine mammal strandings throughout the Bering Strait Region. No other individuals or entities should attempt to respond (handle, transport, feed, disturb, or relocate) to stranded marine mammals in this area without prior authorization from NMFS. If these points of contact are not reachable, marine mammals that are stranded, distressed, or entangled should be reported to NOAA 24-Hour Stranding Hotline at 1-877-925-7773.



All marine mammals are protected from “take” by the MMPA. This includes a prohibition on harassment, which means "any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild; or has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, sheltering" is not allowed.

Although an exemption from take exists under the MMPA for local, state, or federal government officials or employees in the course of their official duties (16 U.S.C. 1379(h)), NMFS requests that Nome officials and community members rely on the established and authorized points of contact detailed above for response to both live and dead marine mammal strandings. Reasons for this include wildlife health issues, human safety, standardized communication and coordination, required data collection protocols, and consistent implementation of the marine mammal stranding program.

An additional aspect of the marine mammal stranding program is to identify, respond to, and investigate Unusual Mortality Events (UMEs). Since 2011, three UMEs have been declared within the Bering Strait region including the 2011 Alaska Pinniped UME, the 2019 Alaska Ice Seal UME, and the 2019 West Coast Gray Whale UME. The 2011 Alaska Pinniped UME closed in 2016 and the 2019 Alaska Ice Seal UME is nonactive with closure pending. The 2019 Gray whale UME remains active. Further, stranding response to any marine mammal species listed as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), as amended, requires authorization by the Principal Investigator or Co-Investigator under the MMPA/ESA Permit No. 24359. Listed marine mammal species within the Bering Strait area include Beringia Distinct Population Segment bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*), ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*), Western DPS Steller sea lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*), bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*), North Pacific right whale (*Eubalaena japonica*), and fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*).

NMFS is happy to respond to questions about marine mammal health, stranding response, or marine mammal protections, and we welcome feedback as to how local communication and coordination are working in practice throughout the season. Our Alaska Region Marine Mammal Stranding Coordinator, Mandy Keogh, is the point of contact for these issues in NMFS Protected Resources Division. You may contact Mandy Keogh directly at (907) 586-7349 or [mandy.keogh@noaa.gov](mailto:mandy.keogh@noaa.gov).

Thank you for your role in assisting the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network.

Sincerely,



Jonathan M. Kurland  
Administrator, Alaska Region

Cc:

- Nome Police Dept (Chief Michael G. Heintzelman): [npd@nomealaska.org](mailto:npd@nomealaska.org)
- Nome Convention Bureau: [visit@mynomealaska.com](mailto:visit@mynomealaska.com)
- ADF&G Marine Mammal Coordinator (Lori Polasek): [lori.polasek@alaska.gov](mailto:lori.polasek@alaska.gov)
- USFWS Marine Mammals Management (R7, Patrick Lemons): [patrick\\_lemons@fws.gov](mailto:patrick_lemons@fws.gov)
- USFWS OLE (R7), Special Agent: [Jeffrey\\_Mihan@fws.gov](mailto:Jeffrey_Mihan@fws.gov)
- Norton Sound Health Corp., Public Relations (Reba Lean): [rlean@nshcorp.org](mailto:rlean@nshcorp.org)
- Alaska State Troopers (Bryan Barlow): [dps.ast.directors.office@alaska.gov](mailto:dps.ast.directors.office@alaska.gov)
- KNOM Radio: [kj.mcelwee@knom.org](mailto:kj.mcelwee@knom.org)
- KICY Radio, Program Manager (Patty Burchell): [generalmanager@kicy.org](mailto:generalmanager@kicy.org)
- Nome Nugget News, Editor/Owner (Diana Haecker): [diana@nomenugget.com](mailto:diana@nomenugget.com)
- City of Nome, City Manager (Glenn Steckman): [GSteckman@nomealaska.org](mailto:GSteckman@nomealaska.org)
- USCG D17 Tribal Liaison (Robert Edwardson): [Robert.H.Edwardson@uscg.mil](mailto:Robert.H.Edwardson@uscg.mil)
- NOAA Office of Law Enforcement, Deputy Special Agent in Charge (Benjamin Cheeseman): [benjamin.cheeseman@noaa.gov](mailto:benjamin.cheeseman@noaa.gov)
- NOAA Office of Law Enforcement, Assistant Special Agent in Charge.(Glenn Charles): [glenn.charles@noaa.gov](mailto:glenn.charles@noaa.gov)
- NOAA Alaska Region Tribal Relations Coordinator (Amilee Wilson): [amilee.wilson@noaa.gov](mailto:amilee.wilson@noaa.gov)
- Alaska Fisheries Science Center (Michale Cameron): [michael.cameron@noaa.gov](mailto:michael.cameron@noaa.gov)
- Alaska SeaLife Center (Jane Belovarac): [Janeb@alaskasealife.org](mailto:Janeb@alaskasealife.org)