



SAC Finds Consensus on Marine Mammal Issue

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At a January 17th workshop on dolphin and whale stranding response in the Florida Keys, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) once again proved up to the challenge of forging consensus on an emotional environmental issue. Monroe County commissioners asked Sanctuary staff to convene the workshop after two organizations asked the County to take over the local stranding network, citing concerns over the speed and competence of stranding response.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act charges NOAA Fisheries (a sister agency to the National Ocean Service, which includes the National Marine Sanctuary Program) with the responsibility for overseeing response to dolphin and whale strandings through a series of regional stranding networks. The Florida Keys are part of the Southeast Regional Stranding Network, with a coordinator based in Miami and three organizations holding letters of agreement to respond to local strandings.

Overall, the SAC found that the three local response organizations (Marine Animal Rescue Society, Marine Mammal Rescue Foundation and Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team) exhibited excellent communication and cooperation, shared volunteers and equipment, and had a high degree of expertise. The SAC also found that the three current LOA holders and their extensive network of volunteers provided sufficient stranding response coverage for the Florida Keys.

The SAC developed two sets of recommendations, which Sanctuary Superintendent Billy Causey forwarded to NOAA Fisheries for consideration. The first set seeks to have NOAA Fisheries formalize several policies that already are practiced by the Southeast Regional Stranding Network. The SAC asks NOAA Fisheries to: ensure that LOA-holders retain their autonomy and decision-making ability in strandings; call the closest LOA holder first to respond to a stranding and have them become the on-site coordinator; require LOA holders to have round-the-clock ability to respond.

The second set of recommendations addresses the availability of marine mammal rehabilitation facilities in the Florida Keys. SAC members recommended that NOAA Fisheries approve a rehabilitation facility in the Upper Keys. Concerned about the possibility of another mass stranding event like the stranding of approximately 150 dolphins off Long Key in 2000, the SAC members recommended that NOAA Fisheries inventory all potential rehabilitation facilities in the Florida Keys and approve them for temporary or permanent use, as appropriate.

Council members developed these recommendations after hearing five panels present information regarding different aspects of stranding response. NOAA Fisheries officials discussed the Marine Mammal Protection Act as it governs stranding response and described the structure and procedures of the Southeast Regional Stranding Network. Marine mammal veterinarians discussed what is known about why marine mammals come ashore and how best to help them. The three local response organizations talked about their missions, equipment, volunteers and training programs and their working relationships with each other. Representatives of the Marine Mammal Conservancy and the Dolphin Freedom Foundation expressed their concerns with the state of stranding response in the Keys.

After each panel, SAC members had the opportunity to ask questions of presenters and highlight areas that required clarification. A public comment session followed the panels, and then facilitator Alex Score led the council members in developing their recommendations.

Fact sheets on marine mammal strandings and the stranding response network are available on the Sanctuary website at: floridakeys.noaa.gov.

*Note: This article appeared in the Spring 2002 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: floridakeys.noaa.gov.*