

NOAA Announces Decision to Rescue Orphaned Orca

May 24, 2002

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) announced today that it will rescue the young northern resident killer whale that's been in Seattle's Puget Sound since January this year. The orca, known officially as A-73, for pod and birth order, has been on its own since the likely death of her mother sometime before summer 2001. NOAA Fisheries is formalizing details of the rescue in partnership with Canada, the Vancouver Aquarium and non-profit organizations in Washington State.

The rescue will include temporarily holding the orca in a floating net pen for further assessment and veterinary treatment, transporting her to northern Vancouver Island, and releasing her into her core range where it's hoped she will reunite with her pod in late summer.

"We're making a decision to intervene on this whale's behalf now because of a series of recent events that make the argument for intervention compelling," said Bob Lohn, NOAA Fisheries' director for the Northwest Region. "Recent bloods tests show that the whale does not have an inborn metabolic problem that might have precluded a reunion with her pod. Our scientific advisory panel indicated that intervention and relocation gives the whale the best chance for long-term survival.

"The whale has become increasingly interested in interactions with people and boats, a behavior that threatens her success in the wild," Lohn added.

"This is a completely new and unique situation, with many unknowns," he continued. "This intervention is high risk. There is a possibility that the orca could die from the stress associated with rescue and temporary confinement. During the evaluation, it is possible that the agency could discover unforeseen medical problems. It is possible she could again be rejected by her pod once she is released.

"Nonetheless, her greatest long-term chance for survival appears to be through this intervention. In addition, in the course of this intervention we expect to gain valuable information that will assist us in understanding and protecting killer whale populations in the Northwest," Lohn concluded.

The agency is putting together a rescue team of experienced and highly qualified experts that should be ready to take action in two to three weeks. Officials are also opening discussions with a variety of public-interest groups. The assistance of these groups has been valuable in monitoring, evaluating and protecting the whale to date, and will be crucial during these next weeks and months. To help with these efforts, and cover a portion of the costs, NOAA will make available emergency funds from the Prescott Stranding Grant Program.