

Northern Pinnipeds (Ice Seals and Walrus)



Update: Unusual Mortality Event (UME) Investigation and Findings

February 1, 2012



Ring seal with flipper lesions. Photo courtesy of North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management.

Few diseased animal reports since November

Few cases have been reported in Alaska since the end of November. Since then, weather conditions have been largely unsuitable for making observations in the Arctic and Bering Strait Regions. However, in early January, three ringed seals were harvested in the North Slope Borough that had complete hair coats but very mild nodular lesions on flippers that may suggest that the disease is still present. Otherwise they appeared healthy.

Chukotka hunters reported no sightings or harvest of sick and/or hairless seals in December 2011 and January 2012. Walrus have been out on the ice so there have been no additional reports of sick walrus during this time period.

What's else has happened since November?

In December, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) declared the current pinniped Arctic disease event a multi-species **Unusual Mortality Event (UME)**. With this UME declaration, the investigative team will have access to additional resources to aid the disease investigation (e.g., the Marine Mammal UME Fund).

Since species impacted by the Alaska UME include ice seals (under the jurisdiction of NMFS) and walrus (under the jurisdiction of USFWS), both agencies are working together closely to help oversee the investigation. The agencies have jointly appointed Dr. Raphaela Stimmelmayer from the North Slope Borough to be the UME On-site Coordinator and lead the investigation. Each agency has also assigned an Off-site Coordinator to serve a communication and coordination role as the investigation moves forward: Joel Garlich-Miller (USFWS) and Aleria Jensen (NMFS). Dr. Stephen Raverty will serve as the liaison to the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events (WGMMUME).

A **UME** is defined under the Marine Mammal Protection Act as "a stranding that is unexpected; involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response."

From 1991 to the present, there have been 55 formally recognized UMEs in the U.S.

For more information on UMEs: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/>



What's Being Done

An investigative team has been established involving national and international specialists from numerous laboratories, agencies and institutions. As it has been to date, the work ahead will continue to be a highly collaborative effort. Sampled tissues have so far tested negative for the more common illness known to affect marine mammals. Laboratory testing continues for bacterial, viral, fungal, or toxic agents which may be responsible for the condition and results will be shared as soon as they become available.

A workshop held at the Alaska Marine Science Symposium in Anchorage in mid-January generated strategies for moving forward with the UME investigation. The workshop was well-attended by a wide variety of involved and concerned parties, including Tribal leaders, hunters, scientists, veterinarians, wildlife biologists, and disease diagnosticians from Alaska and beyond. It was extremely productive as a forum for information exchange, as well as developing next steps for field protocols, diagnostics, and communications.

A communication team was established as a result of this symposium to get timely updates out to communities and hunters. We are compiling a list of frequently asked questions that will be updated and shared with communities as answers become available.

Food Safety Concerns

This is the first UME involving subsistence species in coastal Alaskan communities. The agencies have been working closely with the State of Alaska Division of Public Health to assess potential risk and distribute general precautionary guidelines around handling and consumption in the absence of a known pathogen. Throughout this event, hunters have been encouraged to use traditional and customary practices when dealing with healthy and/or sick seals.

At present, there is no evidence that consuming animals involved in this disease event has caused any human illness. **Until more information becomes available, however, we continue to recommend the following general public health precautions (also apply when interacting with any animal in the wild):**



- do not eat any animals that appear sick or diseased
- do not allow dogs to interact with or eat diseased animals
- always follow safe handling guidelines for marine mammals
 - wear rubber gloves during butchering or handling
 - thoroughly your hands and equipment afterwards
- while cooking is a personal choice/preference, it can help kill parasites and bacteria in raw meat
- if you feel sick, contact your local health care provider immediately

A sickened ringed seal found near Barrow, Alaska, in 2011. Photo courtesy of North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management.

If you find a seal or walrus acting abnormally or showing signs of illness, note its location and contact your local wildlife authority as soon as possible

For more background on this event, updates, and how to help, see:

<http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice/diseased/default.htm>

http://alaska.fws.gov/fisheries/mmm/walrus/disease_investigation.htm