

ACS Newsletter Article Re: Whale Disentanglement By Mary J. Whitney of Fluke Foundation

It all started about two years ago with a question. "Why doesn't CA have a coordinated statewide program for disentangling whales like Hawaii?" Today it does. The Central and Northern CA region has a fully functional network of volunteers, NGO's and government agencies, available to assess a whale in distress and disentangle as needed. This new disentanglement network calls itself W.E.T (whale entanglement teams). Soon there will be a toll free hotline available 24/7 to report entangled whales.

When the topic of entangled whales was initially discussed at the MBNMS Conservation Working Group meeting, it received attention that soon became a strong dedication to a solution. In November 2007 the MBNMS Conservation Working Group hosted a major meeting in Moss Landing to determine the needs for disentanglement in CA and specifically in the MBNMS. A number of key marine professionals attended and it was a giant positive step toward forming a disentanglement plan.

In May 2008 there was an unprecedented two-day training and strategy meeting at Moss Landing with all key stranding/disentanglement decision makers in attendance. The green light was given with full authority to develop a Central and Northern CA whale disentanglement network. The entire group is highly motivated to shape the best possible program. Considering the variety of cetaceans and fisheries along the CA coast, the likelihood of entanglement is fairly high. Unfortunately a whale will usually drag gear/debris around until it starves or suffers systemic infection. The lucky whale will "throw" the gear on its own leaving telltale scars on its body

By August 2008, Northern & Central CA were clearly on the same page. A training and strategy session was held at Moss Landing. The Federal ICS (incident command system) was adopted for the whale rescue operations. This put in place a standardized protocol for everyone to follow. The government agencies involved already use ICS. The idea being that a whale disentangler can go from CA to HI to AK and fall right into place just as a firefighter would. That afternoon, all authorized personnel and available equipment were on the water simulating an entangled whale rescue. Procedures were reviewed and gaps in the existing equipment cache were noted. Hopefully funding will come from a possible Prescott grant to purchase more essential gear. Additional contributions will still be necessary to round out the equipment cache for Monterey. Whale rescue is an extremely expensive (read priceless) endeavor.

Disentanglement is still a somewhat controversial issue. There is always a serious concern that maverick misguided attempts to free entangled whales will bring misinformed media attention to the issue. This is an extremely dangerous task that requires special training, equipment, support, and authorization. For some background, there is still no actual law that covers most entangled whales. The MMPA covers a live whale on a beach, a whale up a river, and a whale anchored to the sea floor by a crab pot, but a free swimming whale pulling a ton of nets for 1,000 miles is not necessarily covered by existing law. Language that would add the word "entangled" to Section 408 has been proposed in both the House and the Senate but it has not yet been enacted into law. If you'd like to voice an opinion on this issue, please go to: <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=h110-1006> and then write to your congressperson.

Any questions, comments or would like to become involved in W.E.T. please email Peggy Stap at peggy@marinelifestudies