

# The Times-Picayune

## First dead whale found in Gulf since BP rig explosion and oil spill

*By Bob Warren*

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Scientists are investigating whether an approximately 25-foot-long sperm whale found dead in the Gulf of Mexico died due to the massive oil spill. This marks the first whale found dead in the Gulf since the BP Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill April 20.

The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration ship "Pisces" spotted the dead whale Tuesday floating around 77 miles due south of the Deepwater Horizon spill site. NOAA is conducting tests to determine how the mammal died.

The whale was not found in oiled waters. However, the location of its death is unknown, the agency said.

As soon as the whale was sighted, Pisces Field Party Chief Paul Felts called the marine mammal hotline to report the finding to the Wildlife Branch of the Unified Command and NOAA's marine mammal experts.

Based on the estimated size of the whale, scientists believe it is a "sub-adult," NOAA said. The whale's condition suggests it may have been dead for more than a week. NOAA marine mammal experts will try to determine the location from which the whale carcass may have drifted.

"While it is impossible to confirm whether exposure to oil was the cause of death, NOAA is reviewing whether factors such as ship strikes and entanglement can be eliminated," the agency said.

Samples collected from this carcass will be stored until the Pisces returns to port on July 2, or possibly if another boat is sent to meet the Pisces. Full analysis of the samples will take several weeks.

"NOAA and the Unified Command Wildlife Branch have had numerous reports of sperm whales seen swimming in the oil, but this is the first confirmed report of a dead whale since the BP oil spill began," the agency said. "NOAA remains concerned about sperm whales, which are the only endangered resident cetaceans in the upper Gulf of Mexico."

The order Cetacea includes whales, dolphins and porpoises.

NOAA said sperm whales spend most of their time in the upper Gulf offshore area and live in areas where subsurface dispersants and oil are present. The whales also feed on deepwater squid, which may also be impacted by the oil and dispersants, the agency said.