



Humpback whale freed on Thursday after 30-hour effort

Seven whale entanglements in ten days

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MOSS LANDING, Calif. -Marine scientists call it a “perfect storm.” In the last 10 days, there have been seven confirmed whale entanglements in our waters. One of the most recent ended successfully in Monterey Bay.

On Wednesday, a fisherman reported a young adult humpback whale was entangled in fishing gear. He stayed with the whale until more resources came. Rescuers were able to attach a telemetry buoy to the 30-foot long whale to track its movements. They used video analysis to see the complexity of the entanglement. On Thursday, they acted.

“We waited for it to surface, then we came up and dropped the knife down ahead of the entanglement,” Ryan Berger, a volunteer with the California Whale Rescue Network said.

It was a 30-hour operation with resources from the local and federal levels. The whale was calm, but a bit agitated as the disentanglement continued.

“We don’t want to rush into this, it’s a cool, calm and collected approach,” Berger said. “We try to watch the whale’s behavior, understand that, understand how the complexity of the entanglement is, and we’re always thinking about human safety and the whale’s safety.”

In total, 420 feet of fishing line was recovered from the whale. It appears the whale wasn’t entangled for very long because the rope wasn’t embedded into its body. The line was wrapped around its body and fins several times over, including its mouth. The disentanglement could be potentially lifesaving.

“You think, “Where’s the line going to go?” It’s going to go through the gape of the mouth,” Berger said. “The animal is going to swim. There’s drag created if the pot is still attached or the buoys, and the thin diameter of the line will go through blubber like a hot knife through butter.”

However, there are still more entangled whales out there, and there could be more in the future because of high fishing efforts and more whales in Monterey Bay. Humpback whales seem to be more susceptible.

“Gray whales for instance, typically stay pretty close to the coastline, as a matter of fact, so close that they’re almost in the surf zone,” Scott Benson, a marine ecologist said. “Humpback whales are going to be out in slightly deeper water. They get entangled on, they have very long pectoral flippers that get entangled. They’re actually foraging in the area so they could be potentially interacting with some of this gear.”

Because of Domoic acid delaying the start of the crab fishing season, there’s now a frenzy to feed the demands of the consumer. But rescuers are quick to say, it’s not the fishermen’s fault. In fact, they credit fishermen as the first line of defense to report whale entanglements.

“We want to emphasize is that we are not putting blame on the fishermen,” Berger said. “They’re just trying to make money and make a living. So we’re trying to form a relationship with them and we actively are so we can find the best way to mitigate the problem.”

There’s a “Be on the Lookout” alert for at least five more entangled whales in Monterey Bay. Call the hotline, 1-877-SOS-WHALE if one is spotted