

Whale stranded off Samoa Beach entangled in fishing lines, buoys

Experts hope high tide helps whale off beach; residents urged to stay away

By **RUTH SCHNEIDER** | rschneider@times-standard.com | Eureka Times-Standard

A whale was found Wednesday morning off the coast of the Samoa Peninsula entangled in fishing lines and buoys.

Marine mammal rescue groups and other stranding experts were on the beach working to removed the lines on the entangled humpback. Residents are urged to stay away from the area because of the danger a 30-foot whale in distress can pose.

"It is a very large animal and still does have the ability to roll around, thrash its tail," said NOAA Fisheries spokesman Justin Viezbicke on Wednesday afternoon. "... You could get hurt or killed. That's the main reason why we're not trying to do things around out."

"It's exponentially dangerous," he added, noting "it does not take much to squish you."

The whale was found around 9 a.m. Wednesday, Viezbicke said. He does not know the gender of the whale or its approximate age.

But its health and prognosis are not optimal.

"It's onshore so it's not very good," said Viezbicke. "We're keeping an eye on it. It will be interesting to see if this animal get can get itself off the beach."

He said by early afternoon the fishing line was removed to the best of the ability of wildlife experts at the scene.

NOAA Fisheries is investigating how it got entangled.

"It's definitely not netting," he said. "It is line and pot and we are in the process of figuring out where that's coming from."

He added the goal is for it to return to the ocean at high tide. The next high tides are around 8:30 this evening and around 10 a.m. tomorrow, he said.

"The tricky part with whales of this size is it is not easy to get them back in the ocean," he said. "At this point, we are waiting for the next high tide."

He said if the whale was not back in the water soon, other options would need to be considered. Viezbicke said gravity "is detrimental."

"It shuts them down from the inside out. ... It is eventually going to die if it can't get itself out," he said, adding that euthanasia could eventually be considered.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which settled a lawsuit with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife earlier this year over entangled whales, urged more action to protect the mammals.

"We do feel like this entanglement illustrates how California officials haven't done enough to prevent whales from being entangled in fishing gear," Steve Jones, a spokesman for the organization, said in an email to the Times-Standard.

Kristen Monsell, an attorney for the center who was integral in the lawsuit, said it's normal for humpbacks to be off the coast this time of year.

"Humpbacks typically feed off California during the spring, summer and fall, though they can be found off California in every month of the year," she said in an email to the Times-Standard. "For example, there was at least one humpback whale entanglement reported off the U.S. West Coast in every month in 2016. So the risk of entanglement exists year-round, anywhere rope is found in the water."