

Crew plans to cut rope to free Hawaii whale

December 4 2009, By AUDREY McAVOY , Associated Press Writer



This Dec. 1, 2009 photo provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows a juvenile humpback whale entangled in polypropylene rope off the coast of Maui, Hawaii. Officials estimate the whale became tangled in 400 to 500 feet of rope that trailed in two long strands, each more than 100 to 200 feet long. (AP Photo/NOAA)

(AP) -- Marine sanctuary officials planned to return to Hawaii waters with modified equipment Friday to try to cut loose a young humpback whale entangled in several hundred yards of heavy plastic rope.

The rope runs through the animal's mouth, around its head and behind its blowhole, and is twisted in a knot.

It could kill the yearling humpback if it stays in too long, said Ed Lyman, [marine mammal](#) response manager with the [Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale](#) National Marine Sanctuary. Right now, however, the animal appears healthy.

A whale-watching cruise spotted the entangled animal Tuesday in waters off Maui. The next day, about a hundred yards of the yellow, polypropylene line came free, but several hundred yards are still attached.

Lyman's crew used a knife attached to a pole stretching out about 10 to 15 feet to try to cut the rope Wednesday, but couldn't reach it. Officials stayed out of the water Thursday because of windy weather and because the whale was farther offshore.

The crew planned to return Friday with a pole specially fashioned by Lyman that's more than 24 feet long. They're able to follow the whale's whereabouts using a tracking device that they attached to the rope Tuesday.

"If we can cut one side of the knot, then we can pull hard on the other side and try to pull it out of the whale's mouth," Lyman said Thursday.

Complicating the task is the fact that two adult whales are traveling with the juvenile. The adult whales - believed to be the juvenile's mother and the mother's escort - have been sandwiching the young whale by almost constantly swimming on either side of it.

Another difficulty is that the whale's mouth is normally submerged unless it's coming up for air.

"They come up from the nose, take that breath, clear that blowhole, and basically there's only a second or two there," Lyman said.

It's not clear where the rope came from. Lyman's guess is that it got caught in the whale's mouth when the animal was feeding in Alaskan or other northern waters. Judging by the wounds on the whale's body, it appears the rope got stuck in its mouth a month or two ago.

The whale could probably eat if it needed to, but the animals tend to fast for long periods this time of year.

About 10,000 humpback whales come to [Hawaii](#) every winter to breed and calve after spending the summer feeding in northern waters. The [whales](#) are an endangered species, though their numbers have grown in recent years.

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