

# Stranded beluga whale rescued from France's Seine river

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The whale will be transported by refrigerated truck to a seawater basin in a Channel port for observation and treatment.

A beluga whale stranded in the river Seine in northern France for more than a week was removed from the water early Wednesday in the first

stage of an ambitious rescue operation to return it to the sea.

After nearly six hours of work by dozens of divers and rescuers, the 800-kilogram (1,800-pound) cetacean was lifted from the river by a net and crane at around 4:00 am (0200 GMT) and placed on a barge under the immediate care of a dozen veterinarians, AFP journalists said.

The beluga, a protected species usually found in cold Arctic waters, will be placed in a refrigerated truck and transported to the coast if tests show it is fit enough, said Isabelle Dorliat-Pouzet, secretary general of the Eure prefecture.

"We are awaiting the results of the blood test and the ultrasounds and, depending on the results, a decision will be made whether or not he should take the road to the sea," she told a press conference by the river just an hour after the whale was pulled out.

"As I speak to you, he is alive, he is on the barge, he survived. He is being treated," Dorliat-Pouzet said.

"We could see that he is a male, that he is very underweight and that he has a few sores," she added.

The four-metre (13-foot) whale was spotted more than a week ago heading towards Paris and was stranded about 130 kilometres (81 miles) inland from the Channel at Saint-Pierre-la-Garenne in Normandy.



Map showing the main French towns along the Seine river. The beluga whale is trapped near a dam at Saint-Pierre-la-Garenne, around 70 kilometres (43 miles) northwest of Paris.

Since Friday, the animal's movement inland had been blocked by a lock at Saint-Pierre-la-Garenne, 70 kilometres northwest of Paris, and its health deteriorated after it refused to eat.

But its condition was "satisfactory", Isabelle Brasseur of the Marineland sea animal park in southern France told AFP on Tuesday.

A seawater basin at a lock in the Channel port of Ouistreham has been



readied for the animal, which will spend three days there under observation and treatment in preparation for its release into the open sea.

"There it will, we hope, have a better chance of survival," said conservation group Sea Shepherd France, which is assisting the operation.

The beluga will be taken onto the high seas and released "far enough away from the coast" to regain its rightful place in nature, Dorliat-Pouzet said earlier.



The beluga was removed from the Seine after being stranded for more than a week in the river some 130 kilometres inland.

## **'A great day'**

"Today is a great day for this beluga whale and for everyone involved in its rescue," Sea Shepherd said on its website.

The "exceptional" operation to return it to the sea is not without risk for the whale, which is already weakened and stressed, said Brasseur, part of a Marineland team sent to assist with the rescue.

"It could be that he dies now, during the handling, during the journey or at point B," in Ouistreham, she said.

The 24 divers involved in the operation and the rescuers handling the ropes had to try several times between 10:00 pm and 4:00 am to lure the animal into the nets to be lifted out of the water.

As preparations for the operation got under way, people gathered along the banks of the river to observe.

"I'm hopeful that he will reach the sea and that he will not end up like the orca," said Isabelle Rainsart, referencing a killer whale that was spotted in the Seine in May but later died.



Interest in the beluga's fate has spread far beyond France.

"We will wait to see how the transport goes, but we may have already succeeded in the hard part," added Rainsart, who first filmed the beluga on August 2 from her garden overlooking the river.

Interest in the beluga's fate has spread far beyond France, generating a large influx of financial donations and other aid from conservation groups as well as individuals, officials said.

While belugas migrate south in the autumn to feed as ice forms in their native Arctic waters, they rarely venture so far.

According to France's Pelagis Observatory, which specialises in sea mammals, the nearest beluga population is off the Svalbard archipelago, north of Norway, 3,000 kilometres from the Seine.

The trapped whale is only the second beluga ever sighted in France. The first was pulled out of the Loire estuary in a fisherman's net in 1948.

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