

Whale entangled in fishing gear is fighting for its life off Outer Banks, NOAA says

January 13 2023, by Mark Price



A female North Atlantic right whale with her calf. Credit: Public Domain

A struggling right whale is "heavily entangled" in fishing gear off North Carolina's Outer Banks, and likely won't survive, according to NOAA Fisheries biologists.

The whale's predicament was discovered Jan. 8, as an aerial team from

Florida's Clearwater Marine Aquarium flew 20 miles off Rodanthe, according to a NOAA Fisheries news release. Rodanthe is on Hatteras Island.

"There several wraps of line around the mouth and tail, with additional line trailing behind the whale," NOAA reported.

"After reviewing documentation of this new entanglement case, NOAA Fisheries biologists have made a preliminary determination that it meets the criteria of a 'serious injury.' This means the whale is likely to die from this injury."

Photos show the whale has "numerous wounds" across her back, and parasites known as whale lice stuck on her head, experts said

The 4-year-old juvenile female is known as right whale #4904 in the North Atlantic Right Whale Catalog created to track sightings. It shows she was previously seen in Massachusetts Bay in May and was not entangled at that time, officials said.

"Entanglement response teams did not mount a response at the initial (Jan. 8) sighting because it was too late in the day and the whale was too far from shore," officials said.

"However, as conditions permit, NOAA Fisheries will work with authorized responders and trained experts to resight her. We will further document the entanglement, and determine if an entanglement response will be possible."

News of the dire situation comes just days after the National Park Service announced two dead humpback whales had washed ashore on North Carolina's barrier islands in December. Both were around 30 feet long and a cause of their deaths has not been revealed.

A dead right whale calf was also found Jan. 7 near Morehead City after it became separated from its mother, officials said. The calf, a male, was last seen alive Jan. 3 in the Beaufort Inlet

Only 11 North Atlantic right whale calves are known to have been born during the 2023 season, experts say.

The ocean advocacy agency Oceana issued a statement Jan. 12 calling for NOAA and the National Marine Fisheries Service to "do more to prevent deadly entanglements" like the one off Rodanthe.

"Fishing gear entanglements are a top threat to this critically [endangered species](#), and this entanglement is the result of continued mismanagement of this risk," Oceana Campaign Director Gib Brogan said in the release.

"The U.S. government should adopt proven safeguards that will eliminate entanglement risk in times and places where [right whales](#) swim. Because this species is so depleted, even a single [entanglement](#) is tragic. With only around 340 North Atlantic right whales remaining, losing a juvenile female sets the North Atlantic [right whale](#) population back significantly."

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