

NOAA declares deaths of large whales in Gulf of Alaska an unusual mortality event

21 August 2015, by Julie Speegle



Bears feeding on a fin whale carcass in Larson Bay, Alaska, near Kodiak. Credit: NOAA

NOAA is declaring the recent deaths of 30 large whales in the western Gulf of Alaska an "unusual mortality event," triggering a focused, expert investigation into the cause. An unusual mortality event is a stranding event that is unexpected, involves a significant die-off of a marine mammal population, and demands immediate response.

Since May 2015, 11 fin whales, 14 [humpback whales](#), one gray whale, and four unidentified cetaceans have stranded around the islands of the western Gulf of Alaska and the southern shoreline of the Alaska Peninsula. To date, this brings the large whale strandings for this region to almost three times the historical average.

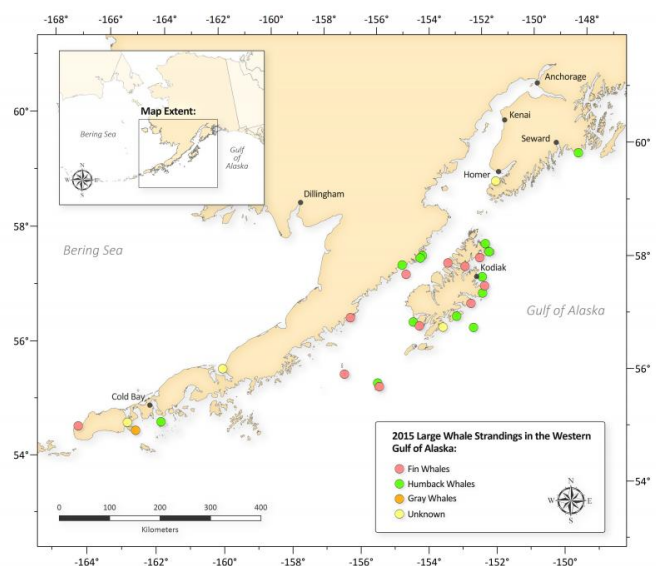
The declaration of an unusual mortality event will allow NOAA and federal, state, and tribal partners to develop a response plan and conduct a rigorous scientific investigation into the cause of death for the stranded whales.

"NOAA Fisheries scientists and partners are very concerned about the large number of whales stranding in the western Gulf of Alaska in recent

months," said Dr. Teri Rowles, NOAA Fisheries' [marine mammal](#) health and [stranding](#) response coordinator. "While we do not yet know the cause of these strandings, our investigations will give us important information on the health of whales and the ecosystems where they live. Members of the public can greatly assist the investigation by immediately reporting any sightings of dead whales or distressed live animals they discover."

Experts from the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events, which was established in 1991 and is part of the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program, determined that the high number of large whale strandings in the western Gulf of Alaska met the criteria for focused resources and research, and recommended the NOAA declaration.

The rigorous, collaborative investigation into these deaths will continue to involve scientists from NOAA and partner organizations, as well as members of the Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network.



Map of unusual mortality event.

These kinds of investigations generally require months, or sometimes even years, of data collection and analysis, depending on the nature and duration of the event. NOAA will publish information on its [unusual mortality event website](#) as it becomes available.

Members of the public can assist in the investigation by immediately contacting the [Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Network](#) hotline at 877-9-AKR-PRD (877-925-7773) if they see a stranded or dead marine mammal. Only specially trained marine mammal experts are authorized to respond to marine mammals in distress. The public should not touch stranded or floating [whales](#).

More information: To learn more about NOAA Fisheries in Alaska, visit alaskafisheries.noaa.gov or www.afsc.noaa.gov.

Provided by NOAA Headquarters

APA citation: NOAA declares deaths of large whales in Gulf of Alaska an unusual mortality event (2015, August 21) retrieved 5 December 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-08-noaa-declares-deaths-large-whales.html>

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