



Northwest Regional Office

NOAA Fisheries



National Marine Fisheries Service

News Release

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Scientific Panel Completes Preliminary Report on Haro Strait Porpoise Investigation

NOAA Fisheries today released a preliminary report on the investigation of the large number of harbor porpoise strandings that occurred last spring in Washington around the time that the U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer *USS Shoup* was conducting mid-range sonar exercises in Haro Strait. A scientific panel investigated the possible causes of death of 11 harbor porpoises and did not find any definitive evidence of acoustic trauma that could be linked to sonar from the Navy operation.

The 60-page preliminary report is being made available for scientific review. NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The 14-person investigation team, which included veterinarians, pathologists, biologists and an expert in porpoise ear anatomy, was convened last July by NOAA Fisheries to investigate the abnormally high number of harbor porpoise strandings in May of 2003. The timing of the strandings coincided with reports of altered marine mammal behavior during a May 5 sonar exercise by the *Shoup*.

Following three days of extensive forensic examinations of the carcasses and high-resolution computer tomography (CT) scanning at a local medical facility last July, tissue samples were sent to laboratories in Canada and the United States for a variety of studies, including chemical contamination, disease and parasites. The scientific team then analyzed the detailed data from the necropsies and CT scans in determining the possible cause of death for each animal.

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The panel determined the cause of death for five of the porpoises. Two had died of "blunt-force trauma," a term that could include ship strikes or natural injury from coming ashore or being struck by another animal. Illness, such as peritonitis and pneumonia, was implicated in the deaths of the other three. No cause of death could be determined for the remaining six animals.

The physical examinations and subsequent analyses were difficult, the team said, because of the advanced degree of decomposition of most of the carcasses.

Although the team said it could not find evidence of acoustic trauma in any of the animals, it cautioned that lesions "consistent with acoustic trauma" can be difficult to interpret in animals with more advanced post-mortem decomposition, like the ones the team examined. It said the possibility of acoustic trauma exacerbating or compounding the conditions that it found "cannot be excluded" in any of the animals.

The preliminary report will be available for scientific review and comment for 30 days. NOAA Fisheries expects to publish a final report in April.

The preliminary report is available at www.nwr.noaa.gov.

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