



Northern Pinnipeds Unusual Mortality Event: Update May 2014

Unusual Mortality Event closes for Pacific walrus due to lack of new cases

Investigation will remain open for other Alaskan ice seals

In August 2011, a number of walrus carcasses with unusual skin lesions (sores) were reported at a walrus haulout site on the Chukchi Sea coast of Alaska near the community of Point Lay. Most of the walrus carcasses were calves and sub-adult animals that appeared to have died of trampling related injuries. Some live walrus observed at the haulout site also had unusual skin lesions, but were otherwise normal and healthy in appearance. Although trampling related mortality appeared to be the primary cause of death at the Point Lay haulout site, the [Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events](#) recommended including Pacific walrus in the [Northern Pinniped UME declaration](#) as a precautionary approach, based on the common presence of skin lesions in affected species during the same time period.

Despite extensive analytical investigations of submitted tissue samples from affected animals, the environmental factors and pathological agents affecting walrus during the 2011 outbreak have not been identified. No known (or new) infectious viral or bacterial agent(s), harmful algae toxins, or industrial contaminants have been identified that can explain the observed skin lesions.

Monitoring efforts for walrus with unusual skin lesions were carried out in Alaska and Chukotka in 2012 and 2013. Efforts included: monitoring coastal walrus haulouts; regional



Figure 1 Walrus with skin lesions (USFWS).



Figure 2 Healthy walrus (USFWS).



carcass surveys in the Bering Strait region and North Slope Borough; walrus research cruises in the Bering and Chukchi Seas; and reports from community members in northern and western Alaska. Only three potential new walrus cases were identified during field investigations in 2012 and 2013.

Although the cause of the skin lesions in walrus remains unknown, the lack of new cases suggests that the specific criteria under which the UME was declared (i.e. elevated levels of skin lesions and mortality in walrus) are no longer applicable. A request to remove walrus from the UME investigation was submitted in spring 2014, and has recently been approved.

The Northern Pinniped UME investigation will remain open and active for ice seals (ringed seals, ribbon seals, bearded seals and spotted seals) based on continued reports in 2013 and 2014 of ice seals with patchy hair loss reported from the Bering Strait region.

Q: Will there be a report about the walrus involved in the UME?

With the official closure of the UME for Pacific walrus, the investigative team has one year to complete laboratory studies and analysis of all walrus cases and samples submitted during 2011-2013. All results will be finalized in a report to the *Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events* that will also be made available to the public.

Q: Is the UME investigation still ongoing for the ice seals?

The UME investigation remains open for ice seals. Although we have not seen sick animals or skin sores in ice seals similar to cases reported in 2011, reports from the Bering Strait region continue regarding an unusual number of otherwise healthy ice seals with patchy to generalized hair loss and/or "healing/healed" shallow sores. Some of these "hairless seals" may represent survivors of the 2011 mortality event.

Q: What caused the disease symptoms in ice seals and walrus?

We still do not know. Despite extensive analytical investigations for infectious disease agents and bio-toxins from tissue samples collected from affected seals and walrus, no known (or new) infectious viral or bacterial agent(s), harmful algae toxins, or industrial pollutants have been identified that can explain the observed disease symptoms.

Q: Are ice seals and walrus safe to eat?

Subsistence hunters are encouraged to use their customary and traditional practices to guide them in the health assessment of subsistence harvested animals. We have every reason to believe that healthy ice seals and walrus are safe to eat. We have no reports that the UME disease observed on walrus and ice seals is transferrable to humans or to sled dogs. Since the exact cause of this disease is not currently known we cannot give specific recommendations on the safety of these animals for food or contact with people.



Q: Will there still be ongoing health monitoring of walruses and ice seals?

Yes. Biological monitoring programs for walruses and ice seals in Alaska will continue.

Q: If we see a sick seal or walrus what should we do?

The best course of action is to remain vigilant and report any unusual observations to wildlife authorities. A list of contacts is provided below.

Statewide contacts:

Walrus, polar bear and sea otter: USFWS Marine Mammals Management: 1-800- 362-5148

Seals and whales: NOAA Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline: 1-877-925-7773

Regional contacts (all marine mammal species):

North Slope Borough: North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management: 907-852-0350

Bering Strait region: Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program: 1-855-443-2397 / 907-434-1149

Bering Strait region: Eskimo Walrus Commission: 1-877-277-4392

Yukon-Kuskokwim delta: Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program: 1-855-443-2397 / 907-434-1149

Q: Did we learn anything from the walrus investigation?

We may never know what caused the skin lesions in walruses; however we did learn many important things:

- Coastal community members and subsistence hunters are often the first to discover an unusual wildlife event and are a valuable resource in monitoring the health of wildlife populations.
- Collaboration and communication with subsistence user groups and community organizations results in a more efficient and comprehensive response to an unusual wildlife event.
- Response capacity is greatly enhanced when management agencies integrate through coordination with existing regional communication networks and traditional ecological knowledge.
- International communications are necessary and required when dealing with a shared marine resource.
- Investigations of unusual walrus health events must consider analytical methodology, research strategies and management issues – in terms of regional public health and food security concerns.
- Developing baseline data for these animals is crucial to determination of what are “unusual” and significant findings in these disease investigations.

Quyanaqpak, Quyana, Igamsiqanaghalek, Спасибо, and Thank you!