



NOAA FISHERIES

Protected Resources Division

Pinniped Entanglements in Washington and Oregon

Frequently Asked Questions

What are pinnipeds?

Pinnipeds are seals, sea lions and walrus. The word *pinnipedia* translates from Latin as “winged foot,” referring to the animals’ fin-like flippers. Three families of living pinnipeds are recognized: the *Phocidae* (earless or true seals); the *Otaridae* (eared seals), and the *Odobenidae* (walrus). All pinnipeds must come ashore to breed, give birth and nurse their young. Some species are at sea for several months at a time, while others return to the shore every day. Phocid seals include elephant and harbor seals. The otariids – which include fur seals and sea lions have external ear flaps. Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, NOAA Fisheries has jurisdiction over seals and sea lions. Walrus are under the authority of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Pinniped Entanglement Team focuses on responding to California sea lions and Steller sea lions in Washington and Oregon.



Left: Adult male California sea lion. Right: Adult male Steller sea lion.

What is pinniped entanglement?

Marine debris encompasses a wide variety of manufactured materials that are abandoned or disposed of in the marine environment. Common examples of marine debris that harm pinnipeds include plastic packing bands/straps, fishing gear, rope, and large rubber bands often used on crab pots. Seals and sea lions become entangled around their head and/or neck and flippers. Entanglement in marine debris can cause decreased swimming ability, disruption in feeding, life-threatening injuries, infection and death.

What is the Pinniped Entanglement Team?

The Pinniped Entanglement Team is part of NOAA’s West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network. The team includes veterinarians, veterinary technicians, marine mammal biologists, researchers, and support staff. The team responds to entangled pinnipeds in Washington and Oregon when the staff, resources,

location, and situation support an effort to disentangle an animal. This work is done under a permit held by NOAA's Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program.

Why disentangle pinnipeds?

Entanglements are a human-caused threat which can lead to significant injury and even death. By disentangling pinnipeds the Team will be able to identify the entangling material so measures can be taken to prevent these materials from entering the marine environment. Our goal is to work with industry to modify the materials used. While the Pinniped Entanglement Team will not be able to respond to all entanglements it is important for us to document entanglements to understand how they are impacting our pinniped populations.

What are the risks to the Team?

Pinnipeds are large wild animals that can pose risks to human health and safety. Team members may be exposed to diseases that can be transmitted from pinnipeds to humans, may sustain injuries or bite wounds, and are conducting work on dangerous terrain. There are different techniques to capture pinnipeds to reduce these risks including manually restraining smaller animals, catching individuals in a stationary cage, or darting larger animals with sedatives so that they can be safely approached and disentangled. With the development of newer, safer darting techniques there are fewer risks to both the animals and the Team. Additionally, the development of darting techniques allows for the disentanglement of large individuals, such as adult and sub-adult California and Steller sea lions that previously could not be disentangled because of their size.

When is a disentanglement attempt made?

Disentanglement attempts are made in areas that are determined to be safe for the Team and where there have been several entangled pinnipeds consistently reported. Reports are provided by the stranding network, researchers and concerned members of the public. Since this is a fairly new program to Washington and Oregon our response capacity is very limited. In general, highly populated areas, marinas, boat ramps, etc. may not be the safest for response and we are not targeting those locations for interventions at this time. Please remember that all of this work is authorized and done under a permit issued by NOAA Fisheries.

How can I report an entangled pinniped?

Please report entangled seals and sea lions to the West Coast Marine Mammal Stranding Network at 1-866-767-6114. The hotline is operated 24/7. The local Network will ask you for the date, location (including latitude and longitude), species, and for detailed information about the entanglement. Photographs are extremely helpful in confirming the species and type of entanglement. Please do not approach within 100 yards of pinnipeds, these animals are protected by law under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and disturbance should be minimized at all times. If you would like to report an entangled whale please call our hotline at 1-877-SOS-WHAlE.

What can I do to help?

We can all work together to reduce the amount of marine debris that enters the marine environment. Host a beach cleanup in your community and keep marine debris out of the ocean and off the beach. Support recycling of fishing gear and monofilament line in your community and support the development of biodegradable fishing gear. Educate your family, friends and community about this issue. To learn more about marine debris please visit: <https://marinedebris.noaa.gov/> Together we can protect pinnipeds and preserve our marine environment. If you see an entangled pinniped, please report it.