

# PETITION FOR IMMEDIATE REFORM OF THE U.S. MARINE MAMMAL STRANDING NETWORK

Addressed to: **NOAA Fisheries, U.S. Congress, and the Department of  
Commerce**

Prepared by **Stranded No More**

*A watchdog group looking after the interests of stranded whales and dolphins*  
[strandednomore.org](http://strandednomore.org)

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## PREAMBLE

We, the undersigned citizens of the United States, demand an **immediate and complete overhaul** of the U.S. Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program (MMHSRP). The current system operates on a deeply flawed philosophical premise—that large whales cannot survive stranding—resulting in protocols characterized by delay, rejection of community aid, sedation of conscious animals, and premature euthanasia.

We believe that saving stranded cetaceans is *conservation in action*. We demand a new structure that prioritizes rescue and survival over data collection from deceased animals.

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL CRISIS

The current system's failures are rooted in its core assumptions. As described by Wiley et al. in *Marine Mammal Science* (2001):

*"Acceptance of the premise that animals cannot survive stranding might result in preparations and actions that aid in their death through euthanasia, neglect, or half-hearted/poorly designed rescue efforts. Acceptance of the premise that animals can survive stranding might lead to preparations and actions that favor their survival."*

By implicitly adopting the first premise, the U.S. system creates a **self-fulfilling prophecy of death**. This approach leads to predictable and preventable animal deaths while squandering public funds on predetermined negative outcomes.

**If the network delays response, administers sedatives to conscious breathers, does not refloat or delays refloating, and does not satellite tag to track outcomes—how can they argue the animal could not have survived?**

## CASE STUDY: THE OREGON FAILURE

The November 2024 stranding of a juvenile humpback whale known as "Pickles" (later "Hope") near Yachats, Oregon, exemplifies the systemic failures of the current network. This case demonstrates how the system's design predetermines fatal outcomes while wasting taxpayer resources.

### Timeline of Failure

- **Saturday, November 15, after 2:00 PM:** Entangled juvenile humpback whale first reported stranded in shallow surf.
- **Saturday evening/overnight:** Officials cite lack of resources for nighttime response. Local volunteers mobilize—one individual swims out to cut the whale's entangling lines while others provide comfort care through the night.
- **Sunday, ~9:30 AM:** First officials arrive. They establish a perimeter and order volunteers to stop all aid.
- **Sunday, ~11:00 AM:** During high tide, officials actively halt a community-led attempt to refloat the whale.
- **Sunday afternoon:** A local business offers a donated excavator, personnel, and fuel at no cost; officials reject the offer. First dose of sedatives administered.
- **Monday, ~6:30 AM:** 41 hours after the initial report, the first and only official rescue attempt is made. The effort lasts only 30 minutes before being abandoned—nearly three hours before peak high tide at 10:48 AM.
- **Monday morning:** A second dose of sedatives is administered just before high tide, compromising the whale's last opportunity to self-rescue.
- **Monday afternoon:** The whale is euthanized.

### The Evidence Against Euthanasia

The medical evidence directly contradicts the narrative of a hopelessly declining animal:

- **Blood Work:** After over 24 hours stranded, the veterinary technician stated the blood work was "*surprisingly normal*."
- **Necropsy Findings:** The whale was in "*fair body condition*," was not emaciated, and had no major injuries from the entanglement.
- **Pattern of Euthanasia:** This follows previous cases—in 2019, a healthy male humpback stranded in Waldport, Oregon for 30 hours was also euthanized, with a subsequent necropsy showing no apparent injuries.

## INTERNATIONAL PROOF THAT SURVIVAL IS ACHIEVABLE

The U.S. network's presumption of failure is invalidated by documented international rescues proving that saving large whales is not a biological impossibility—it is a matter of institutional will and proper techniques.

- **Brazil (2000):** A humpback whale was successfully refloated after a 12-hour rescue. DNA samples confirmed the *same whale was sighted alive and healthy eight years later*—definitive proof of long-term survival.
- **Angola (2025):** A 14-meter humpback whale was successfully refloated after **58 hours** on the beach, using heavy machinery and international expert guidance.
- **Argentina (2021):** A 30-person team successfully rescued two stranded humpback whales near Buenos Aires, integrating community efforts with equipment including a backhoe tractor.
- **Tasmania (2007):** Rescue teams saved seven stranded sperm whales over four days using modified aquaculture nets towed between jet boats.
- **Mexico & Namibia:** Navy and civilian teams successfully refloated humpbacks using only their hands—no heavy machinery required—demonstrating the power of rapid, low-tech community response.
- **Brazil (2023):** A team reversed an initial euthanasia decision for a stranded humpback calf upon sighting the mother nearby, successfully reuniting the pair—who were resighted together two days later.

**Critical Question: When was the last humpback whale successfully rescued in the United States with documented long-term survival?**

## OUR DEMANDS: EIGHT PILLARS OF REFORM

### 1. MANDATE A STRUCTURAL OVERHAUL TO ELIMINATE CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The network must be restructured into distinct divisions with clear, separate missions:

- **Rapid Response, Rescue, and Refloat Division:** Dedicated solely to immediate response, rescue techniques, and refloating operations.
- **Rehabilitation, Treatment, and Release Division:** Responsible for treating sick or injured cetaceans with proper facilities.
- **Independent Necropsy Lab:** Mandated for impartial examination of deceased animals, eliminating the conflict where entities that euthanize perform post-mortems.
- **Biological Data Collection Division:** Restricted solely to collection and analysis of data from dead or already euthanized animals.

### 2. ESTABLISH REHABILITATION INFRASTRUCTURE WITH SUSTAINABLE FUNDING

The United States has no dedicated rehabilitation facilities for large cetaceans, ensuring only two outcomes: half-hearted refloating or euthanasia.

- Federal funds must be earmarked to create dedicated large cetacean rehabilitation facilities.
- Federal action must supersede restrictive state-level policies (such as Oregon's OAR 635-062-0020) that prohibit marine mammal rehabilitation.
- Mobile treatment protocols must be developed for field stabilization of stranded animals.

- **Sustainable Funding Model:** Rehabilitation facilities shall be permitted to charge admission for public attendance and educational programs, creating a self-sustaining revenue stream that reduces dependence on federal appropriations while building public awareness and support for marine mammal conservation.
- **Conversion of Existing Facilities:** Mandate the modification, closure, or delisting of dolphinariums, oceanariums, and similar captive cetacean facilities, with priority given to converting these existing infrastructures into legitimate rescue, rehabilitation, and release centers dedicated to wild cetacean recovery rather than entertainment.

### 3. CREATE A TRAINED COMMUNITY RAPID RESPONDER PROGRAM

End the destructive practice of rejecting willing, immediate community support.

Establish a formal program modeled on the **Volunteer Firefighter framework**:

- **Temporary Federal Employee Status:** Trained and certified local rapid responders shall be activated as temporary federal or state employees for the duration of a stranding event, solving liability concerns for NOAA while formally integrating local knowledge and assets into the official response structure.
- **Worker's Compensation Coverage:** Activated responders shall receive full worker's compensation protections during stranding events, ensuring they are covered for any injuries sustained while performing rescue operations.
- **Paid Training and Certification:** Community responders shall receive compensation for completing certified training courses in marine mammal rescue techniques, including international best practices such as net systems, multi-boat stabilization, and coordinated refloating operations.
- **Regular Drills and Continuing Education:** Responders shall participate in regular paid drills and exercises to maintain readiness, with all training hours counting toward stranding response qualifications and certifications.
- **Local Knowledge Integration:** Trained local responders know their coastal areas intimately—tides, currents, access points, and available resources—ensuring rapid response times that distant federal teams cannot match.

### 4. AMEND THE MARINE MAMMAL PROTECTION ACT

- Amend the MMPA to formally authorize the Community Rapid Responder Program, establishing the legal framework for temporary federal employee status during stranding events.
- Remove regulatory barriers that currently prevent trained community members from participating in rescue operations.
- Establish clear protocols for the acceptance and integration of donated equipment and resources during stranding events.

### 5. ENFORCE ABSOLUTE TRANSPARENCY AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

- **Public Data Access:** Immediately mandate the public release of the full National Stranding Database.

- **Drug Protocol Transparency:** Require complete disclosure of all drug cocktails (including sedatives) administered to conscious cetaceans, with justification for why sedatives were given before refloating attempts.
- **Independent Necropsies:** Mandate third-party necropsies for all euthanized animals to ensure impartial findings.

## 6. LEGISLATE A 'SURVIVAL DATA FIRST' MANDATE

- Require satellite tagging of all refloated large cetaceans to gather verifiable, long-term survival data.
- Align U.S. practices with international successes that have used post-release monitoring to prove survival is achievable.
- Use collected survival data to challenge and disprove outdated assumptions about stranding outcomes.

## 7. IMPLEMENT PERFORMANCE-BASED FUNDING

- Tie all federal taxpayer funding directly to documented rescue success rates, not merely attendance at stranding events.
- Recognize that integrating trained local responders and utilizing community resources is more fiscally responsible than maintaining an expensive, distant, and ineffective federal-only response.
- Divest from organizations that consistently fail to produce positive outcomes.

## 8. MANDATE RAPID RESPONSE PROTOCOLS WITH ACCOUNTABILITY

- Establish mandatory response timeframes with clear accountability for delays.
- Require public documentation and justification for all rescue versus euthanasia decisions.
- Prohibit the administration of sedatives to conscious-breathing cetaceans prior to refloating attempts without documented veterinary justification showing the drug will not impair self-rescue capability.

# CONCLUSION: EMBRACE THE PHILOSOPHY OF SURVIVAL

The death of the juvenile humpback whale in Oregon was the predictable outcome of a federal program philosophically oriented toward failure and structurally designed for fiscal inefficiency. Its protocols—defined by delay, rejection of free community resources, and a focus on post-mortem data collection—ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent managing death rather than championing life.

This expensive U.S. model stands in stark contrast to the cost-effective successes of international programs, which have proven that saving large whales is a matter of *policy and will*, not a financial or biological impossibility.

**The United States has the resources and expertise to lead. Yet it continues to lag behind, trapped in a cycle of wasteful, self-fulfilling prophecy.**

We, the undersigned, demand immediate reform. *Conservation means action—rescue, rehabilitation, and release.* The United States must abandon the philosophy of death and embrace the philosophy of survival.

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## SIGNATURES

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Printed Name

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