

**Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Response – Recommended Steps for the
Collection of Level A Data
NMFS Alaska Stranding Hotline Number: 1-877-925-7773**

1. **After you receive the report of a stranded animal, before you go to check it out and as you arrive, the following are recommended actions:**
 - **Contact NMFS Alaska stranding staff** directly or through the hotline number above to let them know about the stranding and to get a **NMFS ID number**. The NMFS ID number will be the unique identifier that will need to be included on all paperwork and samples associated with the stranded animal.
 - Use the **notebook** in the kit to record data.
 - Add the full **contact information** of initial reporter. Get good directions to the stranded animal and know the tides.
 - Use a **GPS or map** to find the site and/or mark a waypoint once you arrive.
 - Make sure the site is **secure**, e.g. no bears, safe marine conditions.
 - Check for **clues** around the site that might indicate history. Document (written notes and photos) signs of human interaction or of scavenger presence etc. such as tracks, trash, or blood.
 - Note: **human safety is more important** than attempting to collect data or samples. Do not exceed your own limits or imperil the safety of others.
2. **Preliminary/External exam:**
 - **Record** date, time of exam, species, and sex of the animal, if known, and current weather conditions.
 - Take **photographs** as you approach the carcass, and from all sides of carcass. Include full body images as well as close up images of interesting or unusual features or injuries. Try to have an object of known size (e.g., pen, ruler) in the photos to allow for indications of scale/size.
 - Use gloves, mask or other **personal protective equipment** as needed.
 - Describe any **abnormalities or items of interest** such as injuries, scars, or lesions and take pictures of what you are describing. Use simple and clear language describing size, texture, color, and location on body. Include a ruler or some frame of reference for size in the photos. Draw a diagram of the animal and indicate where you see injuries, lesions or other abnormalities.
 - Using the definitions on the next page, document the animal's **condition code** (Code 1-6).
3. **Morphometrics (external measurements):**
 - Straighten out the carcass as much as possible. Seals and sea lions are best positioned on their back if possible. Use the measuring tape to measure the **straight length** by holding the tape over the front tip of nose to the back tip of tail (without touching the animal). In cetaceans, straight length is measured from the tip of snout to the dip in the middle of the tail fins.
 - For beluga whales, also measure the distance from the middle of the blowhole to the start/front edge of the dorsal ridge.
4. **Basic Samples:**
 - **Collect a piece of skin** for genetic analyses. In seals and sea lions, use the scalpel to remove a small piece of skin from the webbing of a hind flipper and add it to the vial marked "DMSO". Note this is a very small vial so only a small amount of skin is required. In small cetaceans, take a piece of skin from the area just below and to the front of the dorsal fin. In large cetaceans, go for the same area, but if inaccessible take a piece of skin where it's convenient.

- **Lesions/unusual tissues, blubber sample (if freezer space is available):** Use the scalpel or knife to remove a piece of the lesion small enough to fit in the whirlpak. If possible, cut a section that includes both abnormal and normal tissue. For blubber sampling, use the knife to cut a 4x4" square of blubber and skin down to the muscle layer. Open the aluminum foil and place sample in foil without touching the inside of the foil, wrap foil over sample and place in zip lock or whirlpak. Freeze.
 - **Document** in the field notebook what samples were taken, where they were taken from, and how they were stored (e.g., skin from tail in the cryovial with DMSO; unusual tissue near blowhole in aluminum)
 - Write the NMFS Stranding Number on each sample container.
5. **If possible, Flip the carcass** (use mechanical advantage such as a come-along if necessary) and repeat all of the above (except morphometrics and skin sample) on the opposite side.
6. **Departure:**
- If you need to **secure** the carcass for additional examinations later, use the rope in the kit. If you need to **mark** the site to find it later, use the flagging.
7. **Back in the office:**
- Complete a **Level A form**, including the NMFS stranding number on the form, and make sure all information collected, including a list of samples collected, is either on the front or the back (in the comments section) of the form. Make sure all samples are labeled with the species, date, location, and NMFS stranding number.
 - Contact NMFS Alaska stranding staff and provide an update of the stranding and to discuss **sample disposition**. Email a completed Level A form and photos to NMFS Alaska stranding staff.

Condition Code

Code 1 – alive.

Code 2 – fresh dead. Normal appearance, carcass not bloated, usually with little scavenger damage, minimal drying and wrinkling of skin, eyes and mucous membranes, tongue and penis not protruded, firm muscle/blubber, fresh odor.

Code 3 – moderate decomposition. Carcass intact, bloating evident, possibly scavenger damage; tongue/penis protruding, skin cracked and sloughing, eyes sunken or missing, mild odor.

Code 4 – advanced decomposition. Carcass may be intact but collapsed, skin sloughing, epidermis may be missing, possibly severe scavenger damage, pockets of gas or pooled oil, strong odor.

Code 5 – mummified or skeletal. Skin may be draped over skeletal remains, remaining tissues are desiccated.

Code 6 – condition unknown.



Code 2 – fresh dead, "edible"



Code 4 – advance decomposition



Code 3 – moderate decomposition



Code 5 – mummified or skeletal