

DOLPHIN REMOVED FROM UNSAFE CONDITIONS AT SUGARLOAF

Responding to concern about the health and safety of dolphins being held at Sugarloaf Dolphin Sanctuary in Sugarloaf Key, Fla., the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) joined to remove a dolphin from the public display facility on June 7, due to repeated violations of federal animal welfare requirements there.

The former U.S. Navy dolphin known as **Jake**, one of several dolphins displayed at Sugarloaf, was removed following charges that the facility had failed to comply with provisions of the Animal Welfare Act (AWA). Since September 1995, APHIS has cited Sugarloaf on several occasions with AWA violations that include the failure to use qualified veterinary personnel, and the failure to conduct necessary physical examinations and blood tests. These violations led the Department of Agriculture to suspend Sugarloaf's AWA license to publicly exhibit dolphins, and to file a complaint seeking both civil penalties and revocation of the facility's license.

NMFS removed Jake under the authority of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), that allows for the removal of dolphins held at public display facilities that do not possess a valid AWA license. Sugarloaf's remaining dolphins, "Sugar" and "Molly," remain at the facility. Since both animals were captured from the wild prior to enactment of the MMPA in 1972, the provisions of the statute do not apply to either dolphin.

"It's unfortunate that the Sugarloaf situation escalated to this level, but we felt that actions by the facility seriously jeopardized the welfare of the dolphins there, and left us with no alternative but to remove Jake and place him in a safe environment that offers proper veterinary care," said National Marine Fisheries Service director Rolland Schmitten.

The rescue was a coordinated effort between NMFS's parent agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, APHIS, the U.S. Department of Justice, the Florida Marine Patrol, the Monroe County Sheriff's Department, and several nationally- known marine mammal experts and organizations.

Concerns about the welfare of Sugarloaf's dolphins grew in recent weeks amid reports of inadequate care at the facility and reports that **Jake's** health had deteriorated. Reports from concerned citizens indicated that the animal was lethargic and displayed wounds suggesting that the animal had been attacked and injured by other dolphins at the facility.

These concerns rose dramatically two weeks ago when Sugarloaf personnel deliberately released its other former Navy dolphins, "Luther" and "Buck," into open waters about 30 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Prior to the release, NMFS and APHIS were planning to remove all three of the Navy dolphins from the unsafe conditions at Sugarloaf. The unauthorized release was in open defiance of NMFS, which requires a scientific research permit for such releases under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

According to NMFS scientists, it is unclear whether formerly captive animals can successfully return to the wild and forage for food, avoid predators and socially interact with wild dolphins. As such, a research permit is required to ensure that individual dolphins are suitable candidates for release, and includes protocols and documentation for rehabilitating an animal to ensure adequate reconditioning from human dependence. A permit also requires post-release tracking to ensure the animal has regained those skills to survive in the wild.

Sugarloaf's release of Luther and Buck prompted a large- scale rescue operation involving personnel from NMFS and other marine mammal experts and organizations, Florida Marine Patrol, U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Navy. Both dolphins were recovered, one which was observed in a local marina begging for food from passing boaters. Veterinarians observed that the dolphins had been injured, each displaying serious wounds and showing signs of serious dehydration.

"We are relieved that Luther and Buck are now safe and under the care of qualified marine mammal veterinarians," said Schmitten. "We hope people will stop exploiting public sentiment about releasing marine mammals to the wild and take seriously the need to develop scientifically-sound methods of training dolphins to survive in the wild after spending years in captivity. To do otherwise is negligent and irresponsible."