



News

For Immediate Release:
October 1, 2009

Contacts: (USFWS) Bruce Woods (907) 786-3695
(NSB) Robert Suydam (907) 852-0350
(USGS) Vic Hines (206) 220-4573
(ASLC) Lori Palasek (907) 224-6893

Trampling Likely Cause of Icy Cape Walrus Deaths

Trampling by other walrus was the most likely cause of death of 131 walrus carcasses found on the shore near Icy Cape, Alaska, according to an investigative team. The carcasses, the majority of which were young animals, were discovered along the beach above the high-tide line on Sept. 14 by a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) survey crew in the area.

In response to the discovery, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put together a team comprised of representatives from USFWS, USGS, the Alaska SeaLife Center and the North Slope Borough to determine the extent and cause of the die-off. The National Marine Fisheries Service provided additional financial and technical support, with hunters from Barrow and Wainwright also assisting in the investigation.

An aerial survey of the Chukchi Sea coast conducted by USFWS and NSB confirmed the die-off was localized to the Icy Cape region.

To determine the cause of death, a smaller team mobilized to examine as many carcasses as possible and conduct necropsies – animal autopsies. Veterinarians and biologists from ASLC, USGS and NSB deployed to the area, with hunters from Wainwright and Barrow to ensure their safety. The six-member team examined 71 carcasses and performed nine detailed necropsies.

Because the necropsies showed extensive bruising and all of the carcasses were calves or yearlings, the investigative team concluded that the cause of death was consistent with trampling by other walrus.

Trampling-related injuries and mortalities are not uncommon at coastal walrus haulouts. The potential for injuries and mortalities appears greatest in large herds of animals with a mix of walrus of different age and sex. Young animals appear to be more susceptible to trampling than older animals.

The cause of the disturbance or disturbances leading to the trampling deaths is unknown. Investigators found no evidence of hunting or other recent human activities near the carcasses. Photographs and additional information are available from Bruce Woods at the number above.