

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Red tape wraps up whale carcass

- POINT RICHMOND: Determining who would remove the 20-foot calf wasn't simple By John Geluardi and Karl Fischer

CONTRA COSTA TIMES
Contra Costa Times

Article Launched:06/08/2007 03:12:43 AM PDTPOINT RICHMOND -- As a small crowd watched from shore just before 6 p.m. Thursday, the five-member crew of the Allied Mariner escorted a dead gray whale calf on the first leg of its final journey.

After dragging the whale a mile from the Point Richmond shoreline to the Ferry Point pier, where it was to be moored overnight, two crew members from Parker Diving Service of Marin County jumped into the water to wrap the carcass in a heavy strap netting so it can be moved out to sea today.

"I think the public is especially fascinated with whales right now," said Tiburon resident Keith Barklow, one of about 25 people who gathered on the grassy shoreline to watch the solemn procedure. "Whales are very special creatures, and who knows how much longer they'll be around."

When the dead gray whale calf washed up on the rocky shores of Point Richmond two weeks ago, it exposed a bureaucratic blind spot that Moby Dick could swim through.

In a grim epilogue to the saga of Delta and Dawn -- the wayward mother and daughter humpbacks who successfully returned to sea after a trip to the Delta -- the unnamed gray whale calf became a political hot potato as federal, state, county and local officials tried to figure out the protocol to remove it.

The whale, which was likely killed by a boat propeller, was finally scheduled to be towed to sea today at a cost of \$20,000. But to solve the knotty problem, Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia and Animal Services Lt. Joe DeCosta would navigate through more than a half-dozen agencies, including the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the California Coastal Commission, Bay Area Air Quality Management District, National Marine Fishery Service, California Fish and Game and the East Bay Regional Park District.

It all began when news of the dead 20-foot mammal reached the office of Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay a week ago. He picked up the phone and called Contra Costa County Animal Services, which typically removes dead deer, dogs and cats from roadways.

Animal Services balked at first because there is nothing in its contract with the city about removing dead whales.

"But there isn't a whale exemption, either," Lindsay said Thursday. "I mean, I knew they weren't going to drive out there with one of their normal little trucks to take care of it."

As soon as Animal Services agreed to deal with the whale, the Coast Guard stepped in and told the agency not to touch the carcass or risk violating the Marine Mammal Protection Act, which protects whales, alive and dead, Gioia said.

Gioia spent several days working through government red tape before the EPA approved a removal permit Tuesday.

"A dead whale seems to be more problematic than a live pit bull. At least the county knows what to do with a pit bull," Gioia said. "In a nut shell, the county is having it towed about 60 miles beyond the Golden Gate Bridge for \$20,000."

The crew from Parker Diving Service in Marin County visited the carcass at high tide Thursday evening and hooked it by the tail, said Tim Parker, the company's owner.

"We're going to hook its tail section and pull the whale off the shore into the water," Parker said. "Then we're going to wrap it in a cargo net."

The carcass was secured to an unused dock. From there, a tugboat from Alameda was to tow the carcass beyond the Farallon Islands National Wildlife Reserve at first light this morning.

"What you have to be mindful about is that you're dealing with something of massive weight," Parker said. "This whale is only about 20 feet long, but it probably weighs 15 tons. For their length, whales are very heavy. Of course, there is a danger with taut lines. You don't know how strong the flesh is. There's no way to judge."

The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito checked out the carcass soon after it washed up in Richmond to verify it was not one of the two humpbacks recently lost in the Delta. Biologists found it was a gray whale calf that likely died from a boat-propeller wound, center spokesman Jim Oswald said.

The center also investigated the death of another gray whale that recently washed up near the Golden Gate Bridge.

"The sad reality is, there are a lot of whale carcasses out there," Oswald said. "This is the time of year for whale migrations, and there are propeller strikes, collisions with vessels."

But even after the gray whale calf is put to rest in a deep, watery grave, the controversy over its removal will continue, Gioia said.

"We still don't know who is going to pay for the removal," he said. "Maybe we share the cost, or there was some talk that because the Marine Mammal Center sent biologists out to take samples from the whale that they may have legally taken possession of it."

The cost to shepherd Delta and Dawn out of the Delta is estimated to be \$1 million, Gioia said.

Although the bureaucratic confusion over the whales' removal was at times borderline comical, Gioia said he's not laughing just yet.

"I think you can have a sense of humor about this now that we've found a solution, but I'll have even a better sense of humor once it's removed," Gioia said, "because I don't think it was funny for the residents who had to tolerate a smelly, rotting carcass."

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