

Wrap up notes

While the following may sound like random thoughts, they are in fact what I think are some important points I heard directly or derived from the presentations made by our panel of speakers today addressing the significance of the Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program:

Marine mammal strandings, as we have heard, are clearly about more than saving individual seals, although in some critically endangered species such as monk seals saving individual animals can be an important goal for recovery.

Of considerable importance, stranded animals provide valuable and essential data that help us understand ecosystem health, marine mammal health, and, for some difficult to study species basic life history information. As editor-in-chief of Marine Mammal Science, I see multiple papers submitted every year that are based on data from stranded marine mammals.

Strandings can tell us about the effectiveness of conservation and mitigation measures, such as, gear restrictions, time/area closures, or ship speed regulations.

In the past the Prescott Program has provided valuable support for the marine mammal health and stranding response effort, but it is unclear whether the Prescott Program will be funded in the future.

We must pay attention to what happens on land as well as the ocean because terrestrial watersheds are often the source of pollutants, diseases, and nutrients that can lead to health issues with marine mammals, harmful algal blooms and increased dead zones (where the water is highly depleted of oxygen)

In some situations stranded marine mammals can act as the "canaries in the coal mine" and signal poor quality or deteriorating environments before they become major issues for humans.

The funding and effort invested in the MMHSRP by the NMFS goes a long way because it facilitates private-public partnerships and leverages the public funding to obtain substantially more private funding.

As we saw from the DWH oil spill, the successes of a quick response in such a catastrophic event can only occur because a network of marine mammal stranding responders existed. At the same time we learned that the network was not as big as it needed to be to cover the vast area affected.

We heard from a number of speakers, but from Frances Gulland especially, that there is a need for a National Strategy to deal with marine mammal health and stranding information and incorporate it into a broader ecosystem framework. Indeed one of the priorities for the MMC over the next five years will be to facilitate and help develop integrating marine mammal stranding data into existing databases, in particular the Integrated Ocean Observing System, that include physical and biological oceanographic, climatological and other biological information