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Joint Statement from Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service, and U.S. Coast Guard: Entangled humpback whale freed of gear off Maui

On Wednesday, March 6, 2019, an entangled subadult humpback whale was freed of gear by a team of trained responders off Makena Beach, Maui. The animal was entangled in heavy gauge line through its mouth that formed a bridle and trailed around several hundred feet behind. The team made several cuts, removing almost all the line, and greatly increased the animal's chances of survival. However, a small amount of gear could not be pulled from the whale's mouth and thus remains. The recovered gear will be analyzed towards determining its possible origins and trying to reduce entanglement threat in the future.

The response, coordinated by Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary (sanctuary), working with and under the authorization of NOAA Fisheries Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program (permit #18786-03), included personnel from the sanctuary, the U.S. Coast Guard – station Maui (USCG), NOAA Corps, Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission, Oceanwide Science Institute, University of Hawaii - Hilo, Cardinal Point Captains, and others.

The whale was first reported at 09:10 am by Maui Dive Shop vessel, *Makakoa*. A rapid first response was mounted by the USCG - Station Maui. The sanctuary's response vessel, *Koholā*, followed with the rest of the team and gear. In the interim, a number of vessels, including the *Makakoa*, *Redline*, *Maui Magic*, *Bluewater Rafting*, fishing vessel *Piper*, *Maui Diamond II*, and PacWhale Eco Adventure vessel *Ocean Explorer*, assisted by monitoring the animal and relaying information while the response team was enroute, a key role towards success of the operation.

By 10:40 am, the USCG response boat arrived on scene, assessed the animal and entanglement, and deployed a working line with a tracking beacon attached. The sanctuary's response vessel *Koholā* arrived soon after with the rest of the team and launched an inflatable boat. A team of responders in the inflatable approached the whale, grabbed the working line that had been attached, and pulled themselves up behind the animal. At this point one line of the bridle was cut and untwisted, but the line was too deeply embedded in the mouth to pull free. The USCG and sanctuary vessels provided safety support. At 12:30 pm, with seas building, another approach was made within feet of the whale's tail, to cut the other side of the bridle as far forward as possible. The pair of cuts removed as much line as possible, along with all the trailing buoys. Only a small amount of gear in the whale's mouth and trailing along its sides was left providing the

animal with an excellent chance of surviving. Around 500 feet of line and buoys were removed from the animal. This was a successful operation that involved the efforts of many – a team effort. Mahalo to all.

Mariners are asked to keep a sharp lookout for whales in distress, but not to approach closely or attempt to assist them. Only trained and well-equipped responders that are authorized under NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program are permitted to assist whales and other marine mammals.

If you sight any marine mammal in distress, maintain 100 yards distance and please call the NOAA 24-hour Hotline at [1-888 256-9840](tel:1-888-256-9840). If unable to call, please radio the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF CH. 16 and they will relay the report.

It is illegal to approach a humpback whale closer than 100 yards by any means by sea and 1,000 feet by aircraft.

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