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Mass stranding of 68 Rough-toothed Dolphins in Florida

MARATHON, Fla. - The U.S. Navy and marine wildlife experts are investigating whether a submarine used sonar before dozens of dolphins beached themselves near Marathon [Florida].

More than 20 rough-toothed dolphins have died since Wednesday's mass grounding of about 68 dolphins, Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary spokeswoman Cheva Heck said Saturday. Many of the survivors were being moved Saturday to rehabilitation centers in the Florida Keys.

Four were taken to Summerland Key to be cared for by the Florida Keys Marine Mammal Rescue Team, 11 have were sent to the Marine Mammal Conservancy on Key Largo and another 13 were to join them later Saturday. Two dolphins went to the Marine Animal Rescue Society in Miami late Friday.

Experts don't yet know how long they will be in rehabilitation.

"We won't authorize release until we feel they can survive in the wild," Heck said. "We don't want to release them and see them re-strand."

The beachings came a day after the USS Philadelphia conducted exercises off Key West, about 45 miles from Marathon. Navy officials refused to say whether the Groton, Conn.-based submarine used its sonar during a training exercise with Navy SEALs.

But naval ships emitting pulses of sound have been blamed for at least one mass beaching. Scientists surmise that sonar may disorient or scare marine mammals, causing them to surface too quickly and creating the equivalent of what divers know as the bends -- when nitrogen is formed in tissue by sudden decompression, leading to hemorrhaging. [Not to mention that the intensity of these sonars can burst the ear drums of dolphins and whales and cause other injury and trauma. - LM]

"This is absolutely high priority," said Lt. Cdr. Jenson Sommer, spokeswoman for Norfolk, Va.-based Naval Submarine Forces. "We are looking into this. We want to be good stewards of the environment, and any time there are strandings of marine mammals we look into the operations and locations of any ships that might have been operating in that area."

National Marine Fisheries Service experts are conducting necropsies on the dead dolphins, looking for signs of acoustic trauma.

"We certainly will do a thorough exam on as many as possible before we go to the Navy," said Teri Rowles, coordinator of the service's marine mammal health and stranding response program. "We have not, in this particular case, gone to them and said, 'What were you doing?' and asking them to do (a sound impact study)."