

The Voice of Southeastern North Carolina

Star-News

STARNEWSONLINE.COM | WILMINGTON, N.C. | 50¢

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2006

Arctic seal's long journey comes to a sad end

By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer

A wayward ice seal found stranded on Wrightsville Beach last week was put to death Tuesday evening at the Virginia Aquarium.

The move was ordered by the Virginia state veterinarian after the hooded seal, estimated to be younger than 18 months old, bit an aquarium staff member over the weekend.

The animal will now be tested for rabies, although the fatal neurological disease is very rare in seals. The only known method of rabies testing is an examination of brain tissue.

While not the fate anyone envisioned when the seal was taken to Virginia for rehabilitation, officials with the marine mammal stranding networks in both Virginia and North Carolina said they whole-heartedly supported the decision.

"The most important thing is that we have to put human health and safety first, and this is a very wise and judicious decision," said Ann Pabst, a marine biologist with the University of North Carolina Wilmington and member of the state's stranding team.

"This is just an unfortunate incident and the kind of thing that can happen to any person who is doing rehabilitation with wild animals."

Susan Barco, the Virginia Aquarium's stranding response coordinator, said the incident had left a somber atmosphere around her facility.

But she said everyone understood why the decision was made.

"Although there's a low risk of



STAFF PHOTO | KEN BLEVINS

the animal having rabies, there's no doubt that this is the right thing to do," Barco said.

"The staffer and all of us feel terrible. But it is the right decision."

Ricky Langley, a medical epidemiologist with the N.C. Department of Health, said killing wild animals after a bite incident isn't unusual.

He said that while domestic and agricultural animals are sometimes quarantined, wild animals ranging from bats to coyotes are almost always euthanized because an animal can have rabies and not exhibit signs.

"I don't know any that aren't put down, and unfortunately that's the only way we can test," Langley said of a brain exam.

Treatment for a potential rabies bite can be long and painful, and Barco said the seal would have been put down even if the staffer had agreed to go through the series of shots.

But what made Tuesday's action tough to swallow was that Bald Bill - so named due to the seal molting its hair and alleged similarity to UNCW research assistant Bill McLellan, the state's marine mammal stranding coordinator - seemed to be on the path to recovery.

The seal was eating on his own and showing a feisty attitude, which included biting an X-ray machine power cord as well as a staffer.

Although Bald Bill had ingested a lot of sand and shells while on the

beach at Wrightsville, that also didn't appear to be slowing his recovery.

The hooded seal had prompted a rescue attempt by local stranding officials last Friday morning because it had wandered so far out of its normal habitat.

The seals, which rely on Arctic pack ice for habitat, don't normally venture too far south of the Canadian Maritime provinces.

But Bald Bill was just one of several hooded seals that have been found stranded well outside their normal range this year, including a pair that were rescued in Florida on Sunday.

Pabst said the seal's death won't be in vain.

"It will definitely continue to help us learn more about the species and potentially offer us unique insight into what's going on with these animals this year," she said.

While speculation has ranged from global warming to overfishing as reasons for the seals' wandering tendencies this summer, Pabst said researchers haven't come up with a smoking gun.

Barco also said Bald Bill's fate would prompt her office to be more pro-active with the state veterinarian's office about adopting new policies for dealing with rehabbing marine mammals, including possibly a pre-rabies application for staffers.

But both researchers said those benefits would do little to soothe the sting for those who had invested so much in the seal's recovery.

"We're going to have a bunch of sad people tomorrow," Pabst said late Tuesday afternoon.