Seal and Walrus Disease UPDATE February 2012

The North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management (NSB-DWM) and regional representatives continue to work with federal and state agencies to investigate the cause of the 2011 disease outbreak in ice seals and some walrus. The investigation is ongoing and we continue to monitor for new cases.

December 2011 – UME Designation (Unusual Mortality Event)
A UME was declared by NOAA & USFWS due to the numbers of animals involved, the number of species, and the geographical extent involved. This UME declaration allows for federal funding to support the investigation. Dr. Raphaella Stimpelmayr of NSB-DWM has been designated as the UME on-site coordinator, leading the investigation in collaboration with Joel Garlich-Miller (USFWS), Aleria Jensen (NMFS) and Dr. Stephen Raverty (working group liaison).

Event History
Starting in late July 2011, a more than usual number of natchiq (ringed seals) hauled out on NSB beaches. Some seemed healthy but many were sick. The NSB-DWM initiated an investigation into the event (tracking cases, collecting carcasses and samples for examination and testing). Information was shared with other regions in Alaska, the Ice Seal Committee, Eskimo Walrus Commission, and IPCOMM. Most cases on the North Slope have been ringed seals but similar signs were later reported in other species: bearded seals, walruses near Pt. Lay, and spotted seals in the Bering Straits region. Cases were also reported from Chukotka and Canada. This winter hunters are reporting catching ringed seals off Barrow that look and act healthy. Hunters have been unable to hunt or observe seals in the Bering Sea region during the last few months due to stormy weather.

January 2012 – Review & Summary of Findings to Date
Investigation findings that we have so far were reviewed during a special workshop in Anchorage and at Ice Seal Committee and Marine Mammal Commission meetings. The UME investigative team includes: veterinarians, biologists, laboratory and public health experts, Ice Seal and Walrus Commissioners, and traditional hunter representatives.

We do not yet know what is causing them to be sick. There may be no single cause. The usual viruses and bacteria agents have been checked. Results have either been negative or not detectable, not consistent between the cases, or similar to normal background levels. Testing continues for a wide range of possible factors, including immune system-related diseases, fungi, man-made toxins and bio-toxins, radiation exposure, contaminants, and stressors related to sea ice change. All samples tested for biotoxin (normal marine toxins such as related to shellfish poisoning) have been negative. Expected timeline for in-depth investigation of possible radiation exposure will be done in March 2012 in collaboration with Dr. John Kelley (UAF) and Dr. Doug Dasher (ADEC). Results are being shared as they become available.

No evidence to date that the cause of this recent disease event is transmittable to humans. State Public Health advice is the same for using any wild game. Traditional subsistence hunters should use their best traditional and customary food handling practices and share information on what you see with community members and wildlife resource representatives.

Recommendations from Alaska State Public Health:
- Do not eat any animals that appear sick or diseased.
- Do not allow dogs to interact with or feed on sick animals.
- Wearing rubber gloves can reduce exposure while butchering or handling.
- Thoroughly washing your hands and equipment will reduce disease transmission risk.
- While cooking is a personal choice, it can help kill parasites and bacteria in the raw meat.
- If you feel sick, contact your local health care provider immediately.

Looking towards the spring and summer
Subsistence hunters are important primary observers of what is happening over the winter and through next spring and summer. A list of hunters' observations to look for in seals are: live animals show abnormal behavior such as being easily approachable on foot or by boat, patchy hair loss with skin sores, hair falls out easily, skin sores primarily on the hind flippers, skin irritation and/or blood around the nose and eyes, labored breathing, shorter dive times, longer on surface, or odd smell. Russian hunters also observed more ringed seals sinking when shot.

If you harvest a seal or walrus that is not looking healthy or is acting strange, please contact the NSB-DWM at 852-0350 (days) or 878-1793 or 878-1886 (eves/weekends). You can find out more about this matter at the following NOAA websites: www.alaskafisheries.noaa.gov/protectedresources/seals/ice/diseased/ and for the UME www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/health/mmume/.