

Dolphins may be dying due to U.S. oil spill, study finds

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Courtesy of NOAA
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Dolphins in Barataria Bay, in the Gulf of Mexico, are showing signs of severe ill health in the wake of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf, U.S. government biologists say.

The scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, working with colleagues from other government agencies, are investigating bottlenose dolphins at the bay off the Louisiana coast. The animals received heavy and prolonged exposure to oil during the spill, according to preliminary results released by the researchers.

Based on comprehensive physicals of 32 live dolphins from Barataria Bay in the summer of 2011, preliminary results show many of the dolphins in the study are underweight, anemic, have low blood sugar and/or some symptoms of liver and lung disease, the investigators said. Nearly half also were found to have abnormally low levels of hormones that help with stress response, metabolism and immune function.

Researchers fear some of the study dolphins are in such poor health that they will die. One of them, last observed and studied in late 2011, was found dead in January.

The scientists started the Barataria Bay dolphin study in 2011 as part of the Natural Resource Damage Assessment, the process for studying the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Since February 2010, more than 675 dolphins have stranded in the northern Gulf of Mexico from Franklin County, Florida, to the Louisiana-Texas border, the scientists said. That's a much higher rate than the usual average of 74 dolphins per year, and it prompted the agency to declare an "Unusual Mortality Event" and investigate the cause of death for as many of the dolphins as possible. The vast majority of stranded dolphins were found dead, but 33 were stranded alive and seven have been taken to facilities for rehabilitation, the researchers said.