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### Biologists study deaths of NW porpoises

**Mystery - A connection has been found between a fungus that grows in tropical regions and some of the deaths**

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#### The Oregonian

Harbor porpoises are dying along the Northwest coast, and federal biologists are trying to find out why.

So far this year 47 porpoises have washed up dead in Oregon and Washington, up from about 30 in each of the previous two years, according to NOAA Fisheries, which monitors marine mammals.

Scientists have found a connection between a few of the deaths and a mysterious fungus known mainly to grow in tropical regions such as Australia. The fungus was identified in British Columbia in 1999 and may be spreading southward, scientists said.

Eleven of the dead porpoises were discovered in Oregon and the rest in Washington, said Brent Norberg, regional stranding coordinator for NOAA Fisheries. Last year Oregon recorded five porpoise deaths and Washington had 25.

Not all of the porpoises died from the fungal infection, but at least some of the Washington animals did, Norberg said.

Federal marine officials will consider whether to classify the deaths as an "unusual mortality event," triggering a scientific inquiry.

"It's a detective job," Norberg said.

The suspect fungus is *Cryptococcus gattii*, first documented in the Northwest on Vancouver Island in 1999.

The fungus, usually associated with eucalyptus trees in tropical regions, has since killed porpoises, dolphins, dogs, cats and four people in British Columbia, said Stephen Raverty, a veterinary pathologist at the Animal Health Centre in British Columbia.

About 10 percent of 250 porpoises examined in British Columbia have proved infected, he said.

The fungus has also been found in a sea otter in California, Raverty said. It has not been found in killer whales.

Its spores, once inhaled, can infect the lungs, causing pneumonia, and spread to the brain as meningitis. It does not spread among people or animals, though.

A Washington resident from the San Juan Islands was diagnosed with it this year, but survived, said Kieren Marr, an infectious disease scientist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle.

There have also been a few other suspected but unconfirmed human cases in Washington, she said.

Oregon public health veterinarian Emilio DeBess said he has asked veterinarians to be on the lookout for cases of the infection.

Physicians in Oregon this year reported four human cases of infection by *Cryptococcus* fungus, but it's not clear if those are the same variety found in British Columbia and Washington or a more common kind, DeBess said. His office is sending samples to British Columbia for testing to find out.

The office is doing the same with samples from two cats that died of *Cryptococcus* in Oregon in the past two years, he said.

It's not clear whether the fungus is newly arrived in the Northwest, or has long been lurking in the region and only recently identified here, he said.

Scientists are not sure where the spores hide, or how they first emerged in the Northwest. The fungus may have been carried inadvertently on ships from overseas or on imported plants, Raverty said. Or global warming may have allowed it to take off and spread where it would not have otherwise, he said.

"It may well have reached a threshold where the (fungus) that laid dormant may be able to reproduce and become infectious," he said.

Marr and fellow researchers from Seattle have searched around the homes of people infected in Washington, but have not managed to find pockets of the fungus.

"We're trying mightily to isolate the bug," she said. "Either it's not present in high enough concentrations or it's coming from other sources we haven't found."

It has been found amid vegetation such as Douglas fir trees on Vancouver Island, though.

About half the porpoises that have washed up dead in Oregon this year have been calves born this year, and the rest adults or yearlings, said Jim Rice, coordinator of the Oregon Marine Mammal Stranding Network.

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