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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
April 2, 2013

**NOAA reminds public to keep a safe distance from sick sea lions**

*Rescue facilities have reached capacity*

Scientists from NOAA Fisheries are advising the public to stay away from all marine mammals in the wild, especially sick sea lions coming ashore on southern California beaches.

Over the past several months, emaciated and starving sea lion pups that were born on rookeries on the Channel Islands have been coming ashore in Southern California. The pups are being cared for by marine mammal rehabilitation centers in Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, however, these centers are reaching capacity. Since January 2013, more than 1,000 sea lions have been taken to rehabilitation centers where they receive nutritional and veterinary care.

As the rehabilitation centers reach capacity, they can only help the most critical cases. Although some animals are being admitted to other rescue centers in the northern part of the state, there is not enough room at stranding network facilities for all of them. As a result, the public may observe greater numbers of stranded sea lions, some of which may be visibly thin and appear to be in distress, on beaches. Scientists are observing these animals on a regular basis.

"Even with the best of intentions, members of the public should not try to assist sea lions or any stranded marine mammal on their own, but leave rescues to professionals from organizations authorized by NOAA Fisheries," said Sarah Wilkin, NOAA Fisheries Southwest Regional Stranding Coordinator. "All rescue actions increase the stress on the animal, puts the person at risk of injury from these wild animals, and is illegal without authorization."

Sea lions are wild animals that can inflict significant injury. Pet owners especially should keep their pets away from sea lions. Allowing a pet to harass or injure a marine mammal may also make the owner subject to violation of federal law.

Individuals who encounter a stranded marine mammal should continue to report the animal to their local [marine mammal response organization](#) or local authority, such as animal control, but should be aware the animal may be left on the beach under observation, and may not be recovered and rehabilitated unless space becomes available.

The number of sick and starving sea lions coming ashore is unprecedented. NOAA has declared this to be an ["unusual mortality event"](#) and will bring researchers together to try and pinpoint the cause.

California sea lions are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, but the species is considered healthy with a population of approximately 300,000.