

National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Criteria for Large Whale Entanglement Response Roles and Training Levels

Levels of Participation in the Large Whale Entanglement Response Network – Definitions

Roles	Levels
First Responder	1-5
Primary First Responders	3-5
Primary Disentanglers	4-5

First Responder is a general term that is used to describe anyone in the Network with any level of training who may respond to an entanglement report under Network protocols and authorization. At a minimum they will voluntarily attempt to standby and document an entangled whale and, depending on training, experience, authorization and equipment available, may also assess and perhaps tag the whale. Individuals with higher Network ratings (Levels 3-5) may act as **Primary First Responders** in local areas. Primary First Responders direct efforts locally and may be given authorization to attempt removing gear during first response. These individuals have access to vessels and specialized equipment. Additionally, Primary First Responders may be on call full-time or at least during those times when there is a high likelihood of an entanglement report in their area of responsibility.

A First Responder's anticipated range of tasks is generally dependent on their classification in the Network. Classifications to various levels are determined on an individual basis and are based on a number of factors including, but not limited to the following:

- Preexisting experience and skills
- Willingness and commitment to build experience and improve skills
- Training
- Opportunity and available resources
- Location
- Availability

Commitment to safely respond and follow standard operating procedures established to reduce risk for animals and humans alike **Primary Disentanglers** are individuals who can perform all of the responsibilities of a first responder, but who also meet the criteria used by NMFS for selecting individuals who may undertake the very dangerous activity of entanglement response (i.e.,

assessing/documenting the entanglement, conducting risk assessment, gaining access, and/or cutting large whales free). Primary Disentanglers must have the experience, training, support and proper equipment at the time of the event to conduct a full disentanglement with a high likelihood of success. Primary Disentanglers are those rated at Level 4-5 in the Large Whale Entanglement Response Network. A summary of the various levels of certification follows.

LARGE WHALE ENTANGLEMENT RESPONSE NETWORK CERTIFICATION

LEVEL 1

Targeted Individuals: Professional mariners (*i.e.* fishermen, naturalists, Marine Patrol Officers) Boating experience and/or experience around whales is highly suggested (*i.e.* professional fishing, field biology, marine law enforcement, whale watching, etc.)

Responsibilities

Level 1 activities: report, standby, and document/assess (within experience)

- Rapidly alert Large Whale Entanglement Response Network of first-hand and/or second-hand knowledge of local entanglements
- Depending on experience, stand by an entangled whale and document the entanglement from a safe and legal distance until backup arrives, and/or
- Communicate with crew on the vessel that is directly standing by the entangled whale and offer to replace the stand by vessel until additional backup or the response team arrives (if needed and within experience)

Criteria for certification

- Completed Level 1 classroom training, or
- Taken the Level 1 Online Training for the appropriate region and demonstrated equivalent knowledge and experience (submit resume)

LEVEL 2

Targeted Individuals: Professional mariners (*i.e.* fishermen, naturalists, Marine Patrol Officers). There is a higher expectation of experience/knowledge and participation from Level 2 responders.

Responsibilities

Level 2 activities: report, stand by, and document and assess at a higher level (within experience)

- Provide a thorough assessment of the nature of the entanglement and the species, condition and behavior of the whale
- Provide local knowledge, transportation, and assistance to Primary First Responders, as needed, on a voluntary basis
- Availability to assist in planned entanglement response operations on telemetry tagged whales

Criteria for certification

Level 1 certification in addition to the following:

- Completed NOAA-sponsored Level 2 on-water training, and
- Taken the Level 1 Online Training for the appropriate region and demonstrated equivalent knowledge and experience (submit resume)

LEVEL 3

Targeted Individuals: Whale researchers and naturalists, fishermen, natural resource agency personnel, Marine Patrol Officers (*e.g.*, USCG, OLE, state agencies).

Responsibilities

Level 3 activities- report, stand by, assess, document and attach a telemetry buoy. Other activities may include:

- Available to respond if conditions allow (should alert NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator if you are unavailable for an extended period of time)
- Initiate and maintain preparedness with local fishing industry, Coast Guard, and other resources
- Prepare local entanglement response action plan
- Provide entanglement assessment, documentation and recommendations to Primary Disentanglers during events
- Lead efforts to attach telemetry equipment to entangling gear if needed and authorized
- May be asked (depending on experience) to attempt disentangle a minor entanglement with potential to adversely affect any whale other than right whales under the supervision/authorization of Level 4 or 5 network members. Authorization and supervision may be given over the phone or radio depending on the circumstances and level of experience.

Criteria for certification

Level 2 responders may be advanced to Level 3 after meeting the criteria outlined below. Additionally, they must be recommended by a current Level 4 or 5 responder to the NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator, and are subsequently approved by the NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator and MMHSRP Headquarters Staff. Candidates put forward for promotion will be evaluated for each element and any deficiencies must be supplemented with adequate training and/or experience before they can resubmit their application.

Level 1 and 2 certification and experience in the following elements:

- Large whale species identification and behavior, and the ability to safely follow a free swimming, entangled whale
- Boat handling and safety including basic seamanship, driving, and close approaches to whales
- Line handling and safety including knowledge of knots, handling lines under pressure, and an understanding of how working lines behave
- Follows instructions and response plans
- Is identified as an ideal candidate by a current Level 4 or 5 responder for advancement
- Can properly document the entangled whale, associated gear, and collect photo identification images for review by the NOAA Regional Large Whale Entanglement Coordinator
- Follow established procedures towards reducing risk

Additionally, all Level 3 responders must have:

- Basic NOAA-sponsored Level 3 training or
- Advanced entanglement response training (*e.g.*, apprenticeship with the Center for Coastal Studies, Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary training, etc.)
- Experience in at least 1 on-water entanglement response effort that included attaching a satellite tag to trailing gear (ideally as the person responsible for deploying the tag),
- Positive assessment by members of the entanglement response network of the temperament and attention to established safety protocols during prior entanglement responses or other similar high-pressure emergencies.
- Know when to stand down a response, even if pressure is high
- Commitment to Consultation to include:
 - Immediate Consultation: when possible, use satellite/cell phones to bring in additional ideas/experience from other Level 5s and Level 4s

(and veterinarians and behaviorists if appropriate) while on scene with an entangled right whale

- Action Plan Development: For a tagged right whale, consultation required with NMFS, Level 5s and 4s, veterinarians, behaviorists, etc.

Rationale for consultation: First assessments and strategies almost invariably change with more discussion or information. Consultation will likely help to increase human safety and critical choices regarding risks to whale health must be made with the best available information.

LEVEL 4

Targeted Individuals: Whale researchers and naturalists, experienced watermen and vessel operators, natural resource agency personnel, Marine Patrol Officers (e.g., USCG, OLE, state agencies), members of Regional Stranding Networks

Responsibilities

Level 4 activities-

- Report, stand by, assess, document, attach a telemetry buoy, consult on an action plan and disentangle all large whales except right whales
- Report, stand by, assess, document and attach a telemetry buoy to right whales
- On a case by case basis and after consultation (see commitment to consult under Level 5 below), certain cuts on known entangled right whales may be permitted at level 4 ***if the proposed action is first approved by level 5 responders and NMFS***

Please Note: Entangled whale behavior varies considerably by species. However, Level 4 responders should routinely be able to attempt disentanglement of all large whales other than right whales.

Criteria for certification

Level 3 responders may be advanced to Level 4 after meeting the criteria outlined below. Candidates must be recommended by a current Level 4 or 5 responder to the NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator, and are subsequently approved by the NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator and MMHSRP Headquarters Staff. Candidates put forward for promotion will be evaluated for each element and any deficiencies must be supplemented with adequate training and/or experience before they can resubmit their application.

Basic or Advanced Level 3 Certification and:

- Direct experience in multiple supervised (by higher level responders or NMFS staff) large whale entanglement response efforts,
- Experience leading an entanglement response (under the supervision of a higher level responder)
- Documentation of prior experience (ideally video clips), and
- Positive evaluation from NMFS using information provided by higher level responders that supervised the candidate and any documentation of the candidate's experience (*i.e.* video) of the leadership, temperament, communication skills, and attention to established safety protocols during prior entanglement responses or other similar high-pressure emergencies.
- Ability to make quick decisions under pressure and know when to stand down a response, even if pressure is high
- Commitment to Consultation to include:
 - Immediate Consultation: when possible, use satellite/cell phones to bring in additional ideas/experience from other Level 5s and Level 4s (and veterinarians and behaviorists if appropriate) while on scene with an entangled right whale
 - Action Plan Development: For a tagged right whale, consultation required with NMFS, Level 5s and 4s, veterinarians, behaviorists, etc.

Rationale for consultation: First assessments and strategies almost invariably change with more discussion or information. Consultation will likely help to increase human safety and critical choices regarding risks to whale health must be made with the best available information.

LEVEL 5

Targeted Individuals: Level 4 Responders

Responsibilities

Level 5 activities - report, stand by, assess, document, attach a telemetry buoy, consult on an action plan and disentangle all large whales including right whales.

Please Note: Right whales are aggressive and therefore generally the most difficult whales to disentangle. North Atlantic right whales are among the most critically endangered large whales in the world. Certification at this level is highly selective and specialized.

Criteria for certification

Level 4 responders may be advanced to Level 5 after meeting the criteria outlined below. Candidates must be recommended by a current Level 5 responder to the NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator, and are subsequently approved by the NMFS Regional Entanglement Coordinator and MMHSRP Headquarters Staff. Candidates put forward for promotion will be evaluated for each element and any deficiencies must be supplemented with adequate training and/or experience before they can resubmit their application.

Level 4 certification and:

- Experience with right whale behavior and/or a person on the team directly involved in right whale entanglement response efforts (in the boat with the whale) that is experienced in right whale behavior
- Documented participation in multiple right whale entanglement response efforts
- Positive evaluation from NMFS using information provided by Level 5 responders that supervised the candidate in a right whale entanglement response and any documentation of the candidate's experience (*i.e.* video) of the leadership, temperament, communication skills, and attention to established safety protocols during prior right whale entanglement responses or other similar high-pressure emergencies.
- Ability to make quick decisions under pressure and know when to stand down a response, even if pressure is high
- Commitment to Consultation to include:
 - Immediate Consultation: when possible, use satellite/cell phones to bring in additional ideas/experience from other Level 5s and Level 4s (and veterinarians and behaviorists if appropriate) while on scene with an entangled right whale
 - Action Plan Development: For a tagged right whale, consultation required with NMFS, Level 5s and 4s, veterinarians, behaviorists, etc.

Rationale for consultation: First assessments and strategies almost invariably change with more discussion or information. Consultation will likely help to increase human safety and critical choices regarding risks to whale health must be made with the best available information.