



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

March 19, 2026

The Honorable Sam T. Liccardo
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Liccardo:

Thank you for your letter regarding North Pacific gray whale deaths in the San Francisco Bay area in 2025.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), pursuant to the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), relies on dedicated West Coast and Alaska marine mammal stranding networks in the United States, and transboundary partners in Canada and Mexico, to safely respond to gray whale strandings. Established under the MMPA, the stranding networks comprise organizations from museums to marine mammal rehabilitation centers, forming the front line for responding to strandings on specific sections of the West Coast. Stranding networks often respond to strandings in remote locations and challenging weather, prioritizing safety and maximizing available resources. While NMFS stranding coordinators oversee the response and may assist with complex situations, stranding networks respond to most strandings whenever they can safely do so.

The West Coast and Alaska stranding networks reported 63 stranded dead gray whales in the United States in 2025, which is consistent with the annual numbers during an [Unusual Mortality Event \(UME\) from 2019 to 2023](#). In some cases, in San Francisco Bay, stranding teams lacked a safe location to complete necropsies due to hazards present at the initial stranding location and limited options of places to move the animals due to landowner concerns. For these whales, the stranding network still obtained measurements and photographs to clearly record the animals' external condition. As teams document their findings, researchers can compare cases to identify common factors or other signs that may help understand changes in the gray whale population and combine information from multiple stranding events. NOAA stranding coordinators continue to hold regular calls once a week or more as needed with stranding network members over the course of each gray whale migration, when most strandings occur. Communication between NOAA and stranding coordinators has continued in recent months to keep coordination consistent and clear. NOAA staff have longstanding confidence in the well-trained and experienced stranding network members to respond safely to strandings. The continued coordination and communication with the network have supported safe and consistent stranding responses over the course of recent gray whale migrations.

Additional coordination is provided through the transboundary UME gray whale investigative team, which includes all relevant California stranding network member organizations. The team continues to meet quarterly to share their latest findings and discuss trends and will hold an in-depth virtual case review, assessing stranding event details to identify common factors or other clues that help understand the broader effects of observed mortalities on the population. Additionally, NMFS shared current gray whale necropsy findings and numbers with the Working Group on Marine Mammal UME, our external advisory panel, during their annual meeting in



June 2025. The Working Group recommended that NOAA and the stranding network continue monitoring the situation but did not recommend declaring a UME at this time.

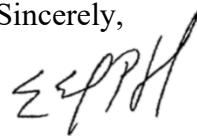
Recent ecosystem changes in the Arctic have resulted in gray whales displaying different behavioral patterns, including anecdotal observations of overwintering in the Bering Sea, Puget Sound, Washington, and other coastal locations in 2024-2025. Gray whales have also been documented foraging in these locations. Therefore, gray whales are likely using the San Francisco Bay (Bay) as a foraging location during migration. However, entering the Bay in search of food exposed these whales to increased risk of vessel strikes, which have been documented in some of the gray whales necropsied. In general, necropsy findings from gray whales examined in 2025 in Mexico, the United States, and Canada show [similar causes of death](#) (e.g., malnutrition, vessel strikes, entanglements, and killer whale predation) as those identified during the 2019-2023 UME. Ecosystem changes are ongoing, indicating that the reasons for the 2025 gray whale mortalities are not new.

Under the authority of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) works to improve the conservation, understanding, management, and sustainable use of marine resources. Although the Bay is outside a national marine sanctuary, ONMS implements projects to protect whales within sanctuary boundaries. For example, NOAA suggests an annual voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction in nearby Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, as well as other National Marine Sanctuaries along the West Coast, to reduce the risk of fatal ship strikes to whales.

Regarding grants under the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue and Response Grant Program, NMFS reviewed and submitted all selected FY 2024 Prescott Grant applications for processing and obligation to the NOAA Grants Management Division in June 2024. Unfortunately, due to the transition to new Department of Commerce (DOC) financial and grants systems, most of the awards were not issued by the end of FY 2024. However, NMFS carried the funding over to process these selected awards in FY 2025 and has now issued all FY 2024 awards. While NOAA's transition to the DOC's new grants and financial systems significantly delayed grants obligations in FY 2024, system knowledge gained and system improvements made over the past year will significantly reduce processing issues into the future. NMFS will continue to work to ensure that all grants comply with the Administration's stated goals and priorities and will continue to work with grantees and NOAA's Grants Management Division to obligate awards as quickly as possible to ensure NOAA meets its mission under MMPA.

If you have any further questions, please contact Meredith Cameron, Acting Director of NOAA's Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, at Meredith.Cameron@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,



Eugenio Piñeiro Soler
Assistant Administrator
for Fisheries