Pacific Islands Region

News Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Rare Set of Monk Seal Twins Brought to Honolulu

Researchers Hope to Give Pair a Good Head Start

In an unprecedented action a rare pair of critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal twins – only the fourth set of twins ever documented – was brought to Honolulu from Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge aboard a US Coast Guard C-130 Hercules aircraft early Saturday morning. The US Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries Service are working to ensure these pups are given the best possible chance of survival with the final goal of returning them back to Midway Atoll in the fall.

The monk seal twins were born on Midway Atoll and it is unprecedented that they have survived to weaning. The young seals, both females, appear to be healthy and are staying together on Spit Islet, the smallest island in the atoll. Both were undersized at weaning. Hence, the need for additional food provided in a captive situation to increase their chances of survival. Past observations indicate that twins have a high probability of mortality and "it will be a first, if these twins survived and were successfully reintroduced back into the wild" said Dr. Robert Braun, contract marine mammal veterinarian for the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center.

The mother of the Midway twins was first identified on Kure Atoll in 1987. The twins were first observed on April 4, and appeared to be only a day or two old. Monk seal mothers stay with their pups for about six weeks, never leaving them to feed. During that period, mothers may lose as much as 300 pounds, while the pups may triple their birth weight. After the mother leaves the pups are left to fend for themselves.

Volunteers, staff and other personnel at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge played a key role in the care of these unique twins by contributing more than 100 hours of work to construct a holding pen for the young seal pups.

"We are grateful to all the partners for the speed at which this operation was put together," said Barry Christenson, manager, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. "It was successful because everyone involved was focused on the welfare of the animals."

The transport plane that is bringing the seals back to Honolulu was scheduled to go to Midway to drop off crew members from the CG Cutter Kukui and NOAA Fisheries Service personnel where they will begin a week of marine debris cleanup on and around Midway Atoll. During last year's effort crews recovered more than 42,000 pounds of debris. "Marine debris cleanup efforts began as a mitigation measure to reduce monk seal entanglement so it's quite a coincidence that monk seals continue to benefit from marine debris cleanup activity by being able to take advantage of the transport back to Honolulu," said Bud Antonelis, NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center.

Presently, the endangered Hawaiian monk seal is in a crisis situation and its population is at its lowest level in recorded history. Now numbering only about 1,200 individuals, their numbers are expected to fall below 1,000 within the next 5 years. Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge is the home to about 50 to 60 monk seals. “Every monk seal pup is important to us,” said Leona Laniawe, the NOAA biologist stationed on Midway Atoll.

“Despite efforts to prevent the extinction of the species, their numbers continue to decline, indicating we must do more to enhance their survival” said Antonelis. “Through captive care efforts such as this and with the collaboration of our partners we hope these female twins will thrive and eventually raise their own pups at Midway Atoll.”

B-roll will be delivered to your news station on Saturday, 5/27.

An update on the monk seal twins will be distributed to the media on Tuesday, May 30. We hope you understand that our staff will be devoting their entire attention to the twins and no further information will be distributed until Tuesday.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, over 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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