



**Oceans Unmanned, Inc.**  
263 San Rafael  
Santa Barbara, CA 93109  
[www.oceansunmanned.org](http://www.oceansunmanned.org)

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Contact: Matt Pickett 805-705-9802

### **freeFLY Drone Response Program Helps NOAA Team Free Entangled Whale in Alaska**

A NOAA-led team of marine mammal responders was able to free an entangled humpback whale early Saturday evening near Dutch Harbor, Alaska with aerial support from Oceans Unmanned's freeFLY Drone Response Program. The whale was first reported entangled on Monday, October 15 and had a tight wrap of line through the mouth and across its blowhole, as well as line and buoys around its tail anchored by a large fish pot. NOAA personnel operating under the Large Whale Entanglement Response Network arrived in Dutch Harbor Friday to lead the on-water effort to free the whale.

Oceans Unmanned, Inc. recently expanded their freeFLY initiative into Dutch Harbor, Alaska to provide drone aerial support for marine mammal entanglement response efforts in the region and was perfectly positioned to assist. Launched earlier this year in Hawaii, the program provides training, equipment, and management oversight to networks of local volunteer drone operators that are available to support response groups.

During this response, the team which included two vessels and a drone provided and operated by the freeFLY Program, spent twelve hours over two days on the water making numerous attempts at cutting the lines tangling the whale. After hours of effort, successful cuts finally freed the whale's flukes from the head allowing the whale to begin to swim. Fortunately, it headed into shallower water making it easier to cut the line attached to the pot. Although the whale still had approximately 200 feet of line around the flukes, a cutting grapple and knives were used to work on the remaining gear as the animal swam until it was free of all gear. At the time of its release, the response team reported the whale in "good" condition, and very likely to survive its ordeal. It was last sighted heading out to sea.

Over fourteen flights totaling over four and a half hours were flown using both a DJI Phantom 4 Pro and Mavic 2 Pro. "The drone support was really helpful and provided improved situational awareness and increased safety for both the animal and responders." said Andy Dietrick, head of Aleutian Aerial and freeFLY partner. "We used it as a preassessment tool before any approaches to the animal, as well as during operations, approaches, cutting, and then used it again for the confirmation of our work. I know many of these responses don't end so satisfying, but a lot of pieces fell into place including good weather, so we could watch a happy whale head back out to sea."

Oceans Unmanned, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that facilitates the use of unmanned technologies and promotes their safe and environmentally conscious operation to protect the ocean and coastal marine environment. ([www.oceansunmanned.org](http://www.oceansunmanned.org))

Aleutian Aerial LLC is an Unalaska/Dutch Harbor based drone service provider serving the Aleutian Islands and Southeast Alaska. Aleutian Aerial specializes in aerial photography, videography, environmental monitoring, habitat assessment, and aerial mosaics. ([www.aleutianaerial.com](http://www.aleutianaerial.com))

All response activities were authorized under NOAA Fisheries' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. If you see a marine mammal in distress, please report it immediately to the NOAA Fisheries 24-hour Alaska Marine Mammal Stranding Hotline at 877-925-7773.

MEDIA: images and video available on request

