1,000-pound whale, second found this week in Indian River County, to be part of study

By James Kirley

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INDIAN RIVER COUNTY — A half-ton pygmy sperm whale found dead late Friday on the beach near Bermuda Bay on State Road A1A by a visiting Texas couple will be studied to determine why these deep ocean marine mammals are swimming to land and dying.

Scientists want to know whether a heart disease similar to one that affects humans is the cause, said Steve McCulloch, manager of the Marine Mammal Research and Conservation Program at Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute in Fort Pierce.

The whale was the second in three days to be found stranded on Indian River County beaches and the eighth this week to be found beached between North Carolina and the Florida Keys, McCulloch said.

"The last time we had this number of strandings in this amount of time was in 1998," he added.

Then, as now, scientists are unsure why the animals left their native open ocean environment to strand themselves on beaches. McCulloch said DNA analysis will determine if the whales were related to one another, possibly members of the same pod.

Blubber from the animals also will be tested to determine the presence of any natural or manmade toxins.

McCulloch said stranded whales often show signs of a heart muscle disease called cardiomyopathy, which also afflicts humans. It lessens the heart's ability to pump blood and is thought to be inherited.

McCulloch said Harbor Branch staff veterinarian Juli Goldstein and Greg Bossart, formerly of Harbor Branch and now chief veterinary officer at the Georgia Aquarium, are studying cardiomyopathy in whales under a grant by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The work done by Harbor Branch's Marine Mammal Research and Conservation Program is largely funded through the "Save Florida's Whales" specialty motor vehicle license plate, McCulloch said.
He asked anyone finding whales, sea turtles, birds or other marine animals in distress to phone 1-888-404-FWCC.