

## Sea lions from 1A

"We're certainly not seeing the numbers of animals in Lane County that we're seeing in Lincoln and Tillamook counties. I think it has to do with where a lot of these animals happen to be congregating," Rice said.

One of the main reasons for this, Rice believed, was the fact that Sea Lion Caves houses Stellar sea lions that are native to the region, whereas most of the diseases are occurring in migratory California sea lions.

"They generally stay apart from each other," Rice said. "The Sea Lion Caves are vastly Stellar sea lions. Occasionally you'll get a few California sea lions that haul out in that same general area, but by and large, the animals at Sea Lion Caves are Stellar sea lions."

Where the animals haul out (congregate on dry land) is where the disease is primarily being spread. Transmission comes from bodily fluids, most notably urine.

"When they rest on shore, they rest on top of each other and they can expose each other to their body fluids that way," Rice said.

Since the different breeds of sea lions rarely interact, the risk of transmission is lower. This phenomenon was also seen during the last outbreak of the disease in 2010.

"I don't remember seeing any sick animals then," McMillan said. "It was on the coast, but we didn't see it here."

Leptospirosis is a bacterium that can lead to kidney failure, fever, weakness, and muscle pain in sea lions. The symptoms of the disease, which typically affects young male sea lions, include signs of dehydration, depression and reluctance to use their hind flippers.

Rice has been working with scientists from the University of California, Los Angeles to discover the connections between the sea lions and the

disease, but there's still a lot that is not understood.

Rice said, "I honestly don't know why there's a large gap in outbreaks. There's still a number of unanswered questions. We don't know why specific outbreaks occur."

Rice was also unsure why California sea lions are particularly vulnerable to the disease.

"It's an organism that's been in their population since 1970, from what we know. There have been animals in that population that have been carrying the disease and spreading it for decades. Within other species, it affects animals sporadically, but not to the extent of California sea lions," he said.

Exact numbers on how many sea lions are being affected by this outbreak are unknown.

"I can only guess at this point in time. I don't have accurate numbers because they come up every day and I'm just responding as they come up," Rice said. "I would say there have been scores of fatalities so far. Beyond that, I really can't be precise."

For the sea lions that are sick, there's little that Rice can do at this point.

"We don't have the resources for rehabilitation," he said. "It's extremely expensive and it depends on private groups to generate those resources. They don't come from the state. Many people in Oregon think there are too many sea lions already and they would not want to see public money going into that sort of endeavor."

What the public has been concerned about is transmission from the sea lions to other species, such as dogs, who are particularly vulnerable to the disease.

Rice said that the public shouldn't panic and should continue going to the beach.

"I don't want people to overreact," he said. "During the last outbreak, we had people calling in being fearful of going on the beach, and there's no reason to take things to that extreme. We simply want people to avoid the animals them-

selves. Risk of transmission is really in direct contact with an infected animal. Unless a dog gets up close to an alive, dead or affected sea lion and ingests some of its urine, it's not likely to get infected."

But, as Rice pointed out, it's generally good practice to stay away from them all together.

It's a violation of federal and state laws to harass, disturb, touch or feed marine mammals.

"Remind people that they're sharing the beach with wildlife and it's always a good idea to not interfere with wild animals that are going through a natural process," he said. "Trying to minimize stress is helpful. These animals are federally protected and they have a right to be on the beach. We want to minimize stress on the beach as

much as possible. So just stay away from them is my best advice."

Anyone who observes a sick sea lion should stay at least 50 feet away from the animal and call Oregon State

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