



## NEWS FROM NOAA

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### **NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE ASKS PUBLIC TO PROTECT WILD DOLPHINS** [\*New Billboards in Panama City Promote Wild Dolphin Conservation\*](#)

NOAA Fisheries Service recently posted two eye-catching billboards in Panama City – a new outreach tactic for the agency to alert locals and tourists that feeding wild bottlenose dolphins is illegal and sometimes lethal to the animal. The agency hopes the billboards will reach numerous coastal resource users and effectively spread the word to protect wild dolphins and encourage people to report violations.

Both billboards feature the same design and message, “Don’t Feed Wild Dolphins – It’s Illegal and It Kills.” They stand in two locations – one on Front Beach Road, 0.6 miles west of Thomas Drive, and the second on the west side of highway 231, 2.5 miles south of Youngstown.

The billboards are part of NOAA Fisheries Service’s “Protect Dolphins” outreach campaign to boost public awareness about the dangers of interacting with wild dolphins.

Feeding wild dolphins has been a historical problem off Panama City Beach. The problem seemed to have been quelled after a 1998 feeding case in Panama City where \$4,500 in fines were issued; however, there are reports that feeding has steadily been on the rise.

“We hope that a new and innovative outreach campaign in the area will help to remind people why this activity is illegal and that it does have consequences,” said David Bernhart, Assistant Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service’s Protected Resources Division in St. Petersburg.

Studies have shown that feeding wild dolphins places them at greater risk of injury from boats or ingestion of inappropriate food items, such as fishing hooks. Feeding wild dolphins can also affect their ability or willingness to forage for food on their own, making them more dependent on people for handouts and potentially passing those traits on to their calves. Other activities, such as deliberately approaching wild dolphins too closely, can be considered harassment if they disrupt other important behaviors, such as resting, breeding, calving, or traveling, and also places them at greater risk of being hit by boat propellers.

NOAA Fisheries Service officials emphasize that viewing wild marine mammals can be an educational and enriching experience if conducted safely and responsibly. The agency encourages people to learn about wild dolphins and observe them in their natural habitat from a distance of at least 50 yards.

In addition to posting the billboards, NOAA Fisheries Service plans to post “Protect Dolphin” signs with similar messages, distribute educational materials, and personally speak to

commercial tour operators in the Panama City area – efforts to help ensure everyone understands the harmful consequences of feeding and closely interacting with wild dolphins.

Feeding and harassment are both illegal under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Harassment, as defined in the MMPA, means any act of pursuit, torment or annoyance that has the potential to injure or disrupt the behavior of wild marine mammals. Violations of the MMPA can result in civil and criminal penalties with fines up to \$20,000 and one year in jail. To report marine mammal violations, such as feeding wild dolphins or harassment, please contact the NOAA Fisheries Service Enforcement Hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service, please visit: [www.nmfs.noaa.gov](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov).

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, 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 our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

For more information about NOAA Fisheries' Protect Dolphins Campaign, visit: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/education/protectdolphins.htm>.

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On the Web:  
NOAA Fisheries Service: [www.nmfs.noaa.gov](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov)  
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