

Update on the United States' Actions to Reduce the Threat of Ship Collisions with North Atlantic Right Whales

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Background

The North Atlantic right whale is one of the most critically endangered large whale species in the world; there are only about 300 individuals in the North Atlantic population. Collisions with ships are responsible for more right whale deaths and serious injuries than any other single human impact, and ship strikes are considered the most significant threat to the recovery of the population. Collisions between vessels and whales occur globally and affect all large whale species. There were 41 *known* right whale ship strikes off North America from 1976-2007; of these, 35 resulted in death. It is very likely that many more strikes go undetected.

The U.S. has taken a number of steps to reduce the threat of ship strikes to right whales. Despite these efforts, right whale mortalities continue as a result of collisions with vessels. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has identified and is developing measures to reduce the likelihood of ship strikes while minimizing the adverse impact on ship operations.

New Ship Strike Reduction Actions

Realigning the Traffic Separation Scheme Servicing Boston: The United States submitted a proposal to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in April 2006, to reconfigure the "Traffic Separation Scheme" that services Boston, Massachusetts. The proposed realignment -- involving only a 12 degree shift in the northern leg and narrowing the two traffic lanes by approximately ½ mile each -- is expected to result in a 58% reduction in the risk of ship strikes to right whales, and an 81% risk reduction in ship strikes of other large whale species occurring in the area. The IMO reviewed and adopted the proposal, and the realignment will be implemented in July 2007.

Recommended Routes: In November 2006, NOAA established recommended shipping routes in key right whale aggregation areas within Cape Cod Bay and off three ports in Georgia and Florida. The routes are an attempt to reduce the co-occurrence of whales and ships by minimizing ship transit times in whale habitat and avoiding specific whale aggregation areas, while also ensuring navigational safety and limiting adverse effects on the shipping industry.

Ship Speed Advisories: NOAA issues speed advisories recommending speeds of 10 knots or less (decreased from 12 knots) to mariners in areas and at times where right whales occur. These advisories distributed through a number of media, including NOAA Weather Radio, the Mandatory Ship Reporting systems outgoing message, National Weather Buoy websites, aircraft survey e-mail messages and faxes, and are published in U.S. *Coast Pilots*, international *Notice to Mariners/Sailing Directions*, and *Admiralty Publications*. Additionally, the U.S. Coast Guard includes these speed advisories in its Broadcast Notice to Mariners.

Proposed Ship Speed Regulations: NOAA has proposed regulations, currently under review, to regulate ships along the U.S. east coast. Evidence suggests that the likelihood of death and serious injury to large whales struck by ships is related to ship speed. The proposed regulations would limit ship speed during times and in areas where relatively high right whale and ship densities overlap near a number of U.S. east coast ports, at calving/nursery areas in waters off Georgia and Florida, and in New England waters. NOAA Fisheries Service anticipates that it will not take final action on the proposed rule before June 2007.

Area to be Avoided: The United States intends to develop and submit a proposal to the International Maritime Organization in 2008 to establish an Area to be Avoided in the Great South Channel off the east coast of the United States. This area has been identified by the United States as "critical habitat" necessary for the survival and

recovery of North Atlantic right whales. This area to be avoided would be seasonal, voluntary, and apply to ships greater than 300 gross tons.

Mariner Training: NOAA has developed, in collaboration with a number of partners, a multi-media CD entitled “The Prudent Mariner’s Guide to Right Whale Protection”. This CD is intended for professional mariners operating along the U.S. East Coast, and has been made available to the Conservation Committee.

NOAA has contracted to develop training modules for mariner training facilities. These modules are intended for mariners attending formal training at seven maritime academies along the U.S. East Coast. These materials have been made available to the Conservation Committee.

Continuation of ongoing conservation activities

Aircraft Surveys and Right Whale Alerts: NOAA and other Federal and state agencies support or conduct extensive aircraft surveys for right whales. NOAA Fisheries Service assembles reports, and “alerts” are disseminated to mariners via e-mail and facsimile, web pages, U.S. Coast Guard Broadcast Notices to Mariners, NOAA Weather Radio, NAVTEX, NOAA Weather Buoys, shipping agents, pilots and port authorities.

Mandatory Ship Reporting Systems: The International Maritime Organization adopted a U.S. proposal to establish two Mandatory Ship Reporting systems – one in waters off New England and another in calving/nursery areas in waters off Georgia and Florida. The systems, operational since July 1999, require that all ships 300 gross tons and greater report to a shore-based station via satellite communication systems upon entering these two key right whale aggregation areas. Mariners are required to report ship name, call sign, entry location, destination, and ship speed. Reporting prompts an automated return message providing information about the vulnerability of right whales to ship strikes, and recent right whale sighting locations.

Mariner and boater education and outreach programs:

- Continued distribution of placards, brochures, and videos to mariners on ways to reduce ship strikes.
- NOAA maintains two websites specifically devoted to right whale ship strike reduction.
- NOAA navigational charts are routinely updated as they are reprinted to include right whale advisories.
- Current information on right whales is provided throughout the U.S. eastern seaboard *Coast Pilot* guides, National Imagery and Mapping Agency’s (NIMA) *Notice to Mariners* and *Sailing Directions*, and to the United Kingdom’s *Admiralty Publications*.
- Holland America Cruise Line, working in conjunction with NOAA and others, developed an interactive compact disc on reducing ship strikes that is now required for certification for all its captains and crew. Copies of the disc have been distributed to other companies in the cruise industry, shipping companies, and the European Union (EU) for distribution to the EU governments.

Compilation of ship strike records:

NOAA continues to compile information on collisions between vessels and whales. The United States is working with the IWC on development of a global ship strike database, and is willing to provide ship strike data once the database is complete.

Consultations under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA):

Since U.S. government vessels account for a substantial number of ship transits each year through right whale habitat, ship strike reduction efforts include consultations under Section 7(a) (2) of the ESA (required for any action authorized, funded, or carried out by any federal agency) to ensure that federal actions are not likely to jeopardize an endangered species or its critical habitat.

A number of federal agencies have, over the years, entered into consultations, and as a result of prior consultations, have modified vessel operating procedures, including:

- protected species training for personnel;
- posting lookouts when operating vessels in areas where right whales occur;
- providing guidance to vessel operators to proceed with caution and at the “safe speed” in the vicinity of right whales;

- transmitting broadcasts reporting right whale sightings and locations to mariners;
- supporting NOAA emergency efforts in responding to right whale strandings;
- limiting vessel transits through right whale habitat when not adversely affecting a vital mission;
- limiting operations in critical habitat or areas of concern to daylight and periods of good visibility when possible;
- contributing toward the Early Warning System survey flights; and
- slowing dredges to 5 knots or less when operating in areas where whales have been sighted.

In 2005, NOAA contacted all relevant Federal agencies and asked that vessels proceed at 12 knots or less when in right whale habitat. Most have voluntarily complied when vital missions are not compromised.