

AIRCRAFT SURVEYS FOR THE NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALE FACT SHEET

- To prevent ship strikes, a multi-agency team of marine mammal researchers spends about 6 hours each day (weather permitting) surveying the water of the mandatory ship reporting area in search of right whales. The aircraft survey transects key feeding and calving grounds and helps reduce the likelihood of ship strikes. Continuously updated sighting information from survey teams is immediately relayed to mariners to help them avoid collisions with the whales. If the survey team locates whales within a specified distance of a navigational channel, vessels are advised to proceed at minimum safe operational speeds.
- Surveys have been used in right whale habitat over waters off the southeast U.S. since 1993, and since early 1997 in the northeast U.S. Sighting locations are passed from the aircraft to central locations. In the southeast U.S. the core group is the U.S. Navy which disseminates the information through a well-coordinated system of faxes and pagers. The information is also made available through a number of real time media, including USCG Broadcast Notice to Mariners, NAVTEX (the USCG international communication system), and NOAA Weather Radio.
- In the northeast U.S., sources of information for the survey network include weekly survey flights by USCG helicopters, marine mammal lookouts posted on USCG vessels, ship-based sightings by the Center for Coastal Studies during their studies of right whales, and research and other ships operated by NOAA's Fisheries Service and the State of Massachusetts. Sightings for each survey day are reported to the Fisheries Service Northeast Regional Center and distributed by an automated facsimile system and made available to mariners through various media.
- Information is broadcasted for 24 hours a day to shipping traffic through established communication channels that include broadcast alerts on NOAA Weather Radio, the USCG broadcast Notice to Mariners, telex updates through NAVTEX, and the Army Corps of Engineers Traffic Controllers at Cape Cod Canal. Maps with right whale sightings are continually updated and posted on an Internet website maintained by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and posted on a NMFS website. A NMFS Inquiry Line provided information on sighting locations and sent information by facsimile to interested callers.

The program is a cooperative effort by NOAA's Fisheries Service, NOAA's Weather Service, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Wheelock College, Massachusetts Environmental Trust, the Center for Coastal Studies, the New England Aquarium, NOAA's Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, Massachusetts Port Authority, New England Aquarium, Naval Undersea Warfare Center Division, Newport, Rhode Island.

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