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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Nov. 12, 2008

NOAA Advises Mariners to Watch for Migrating Right Whales

NOAA's Fisheries Service advises all mariners and fishermen to keep a sharp look out for North Atlantic right whales in southeast U.S. waters from Nov. 15 through April 15.

Each year, pregnant female North Atlantic right whales migrate southward more than 1,000 miles from their feeding area off Canada and New England to the warm, calm coastal waters off South Carolina, Georgia, and northeastern Florida to give birth and nurse their young. These waters are the only known calving area for the species.

"Calving season is the most critical time of year for North Atlantic right whales, especially since only about 300 individuals remain," said Barb Zoodsma, NOAA's Fisheries Service southeast right whale biologist. "We need to do what we can to protect this species."

North Atlantic right whales are among the most endangered marine mammal populations in the world. Vessel strikes and entanglement in fixed fishing gear are the two greatest threats to their recovery.

This species is protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973 and the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, and NOAA's Fisheries Service reminds mariners and anglers of some specific regulations implemented to protect the species.

- Federal law prohibits approaching or remaining within 500 yards of right whales.
- Gillnet fishing and possession is prohibited in the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area North from Nov. 15 through April 15, with an exemption for transiting through this area if gear is stowed in accordance with the rule.
- Gillnet fishing is prohibited in the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area South from Dec. 1 through Mar. 31, with limited exemptions for gillnet fishing for sharks and Spanish mackerel.
- Effective Dec. 9, the Right Whale Ship Strike Reduction Rule restricts vessel greater than 65 feet to speeds of 10 knots or less in seasonal management areas including calving and nursery grounds in the southeastern U.S. from Nov. 15 through April 15.

NOAA's Fisheries Service encourages people to report sightings of dead, injured, or entangled whales to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission at 1-888-404-FWCC (3922). All live right whale sightings should be reported to 1-877-97-WHALE or 1-877-979-4253.

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