

**ROUTING OF SHIPS, SHIP REPORTING AND RELATED MATTERS
SHIP STRIKES OF ENDANGERED NORTHERN RIGHT WHALES
Submitted by the Government of the United States**

SUMMARY

Executive summary: Action to be taken: Related documents:	This document provides information on the results of the effectiveness of the two ship reporting systems, "Off the northeastern and southeastern coasts of the United States", adopted by the Maritime Safety Committee at its 70 th session. At the time of adoption of the systems, the United States offered to provide this information to the Sub-committee. Paragraph 12. Regulation 11 of Chapter V of the International Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea, MSC 70(23), MSC 43(64), MSC 69/Inf. 21, MEPC 40/Inf. 9, NAV 44/3/1, NAV 44/Inf. 4.
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Introduction

1. The Maritime Safety Committee, at its 70th session, adopted two mandatory ship reporting systems, "Off the northeastern and southeastern coasts of the United States." The objective of these systems is to reduce the threat of ship strikes of the highly endangered northern right whale. Commercial ships of 300 gross tons and above are required to report into these systems. The system in the northeastern United States became effective on July 1, 1999 and operates year round, while the system in the southeastern United States became effective on November 15, 1999 and operates from November 15 through April 15. The United States has kept the systems under continuous review and thus provides the following information to the Sub-committee.

Recent Developments

2. Extensive studies of the northern right whale population in the western North Atlantic over the past 20 years indicate that it numbers no more than 350 whales and may number less than 300. Each whale in the population and its history is known by a photo identification. This facilitates building case histories for each whale. It also allows scientists and experts to monitor the status of the population. In recent years, calf production in this population has been erratic and low; however, in the winter of 2001, thirty-one calves were born. Although this is a very positive development, on average nearly twenty percent of the calves in this population die in their first year.

3. This positive news regarding the 2001 calf production was tempered in March by the discovery of a six-month old male northern right whale, which washed up on the beach off the

coast of Virginia. A necropsy of the animal indicated that it almost certainly died as a result of a ship strike. This death is a reminder of the very real threat posed to this population by ships. The northern right whales' migration route, their northern summer feeding grounds, and their southern winter calving grounds occur in the same areas as some of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Since 1991, over 50% of confirmed northern right whale mortalities have been attributed to ship strikes. The reduction in the threat of ship strikes of northern right whales was a primary motivating factor for the U.S. proposal to establish the two mandatory ship reporting systems through IMO.

4. The ship reporting systems are an integral part of a concerted effort to increase the awareness of mariners and engage the assistance of the maritime community in addressing this issue. Representatives of the shipping industry also routinely participate in regular meetings of the Ship Strike Committee of the Northeast and Southeast Implementation Teams. These teams are tasked with convening stakeholders including representatives of shipping companies, port authorities, pilots' associations, conservation groups, researchers and federal and state agencies to examine management options for reducing ship collisions with northern right whales. In April 2001, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in coordination with the International Fund for Animal Welfare, sponsored a Workshop on Developing Management Options for Reducing Ship Strikes. Over 27 participants from various maritime sectors attended this meeting and a further 9 provided comments prior to it, to discuss potential ways to reduce the threat of ship strikes of northern right whales.

5. Engaging mariners in addressing this issue, the critical overflights that provide northern right whale sighting information to ships, and the distribution of material to inform mariners has yielded tangible and important benefits. Within a one-week period during the 2001 winter calving season off the southeast coast of the United States, there were three examples of where ships independently took evasive action to avoid striking northern right whales. Two of these ships were relayed information from an overflight. The other ship was observed making an extreme course change. When the survey flight team went to investigate, it arrived in time to see the ship beginning to reestablish its original course. Four whales were found in the area that the ship had avoided; as the team flew over the area, more whales surfaced for a total of nine. Two other ships, obviously aware of the endangered status of the northern right whale, radioed in to the U.S. Coast Guard when they observed floating whale carcasses. One checked back after its initial report to be assured that the dead whale it saw was not in fact a northern right whale.

Mandatory Ship Reporting System

6. The U.S. Government very much appreciates the efforts of mariners to reduce the threat of ship strikes of northern right whales, including their participation in the ship reporting systems. Ships that submit properly formatted messages in accordance with the IMO-adopted requirements receive northern right whale location information within minutes of submitting the report.

7. Since the beginning of the operation of the IMO-adopted ship reporting systems, there have been over 2,700 valid ship reports. From July 1, 1999 through December 31, 2000, the northeast reporting area – which operates year round – received approximately 1,898 ship reports. The

southeast reporting area – which operates only seasonally – received approximately 855 ship reports. To ensure the messages in the database are valid ship reports, all incoming messages are reviewed to separate valid reports from other entries such as duplicate messages and various unidentifiable or erroneous entries. Vigorous efforts are continuing to further perfect the system, including ongoing efforts to educate mariners on proper reporting format and related matters. Proper formatting is essential, since the systems must be able to receive, recognize, and process incoming reports in order for the ships to receive the automatic return messages containing northern right whale location information.

8. The United States has also been monitoring compliance with the systems, using a comparison with reports made for port arrivals. Since the systems began operation, overall compliance is estimated at 53 percent, with 1,127 ship reports submitted out of 2,143 total arrivals in Boston, Massachusetts, and Jacksonville, Florida. Compliance in the northeast reporting system has averaged 64 percent while compliance in the southeast has averaged 43 percent. While there is still need to improve the rate of compliance, the overall trend is that compliance rates are increasing. Compliance rates have risen from 36% when the system in the northeast began operation in July 1999, to over 52% as of December 2000.

9. A number of steps have been taken to increase compliance rates. In the northeast, a large ceremony was held in Boston at which two members of the President's cabinet, a U.S. senator, two congressmen, and shipping industry representatives spoke. Information on the systems is distributed to shipping companies, port authorities, harbor pilots, and other maritime organizations. Such information is also distributed to ships during U.S. Coast Guard inspections. NOAA Fisheries have sent out letters directly to non-compliant ships or to the appropriate shipping agents, although the U.S. Coast Guard has recently agreed to assume this responsibility. Additionally, although a vigorous education effort has been and will continue to be the cornerstone of Coast Guard and NOAA efforts to implement the ship reporting systems, education efforts may be augmented with the assessment of civil penalties to improve compliance with the systems' requirements. The Coast Guard is providing letters to shipowners, masters, and agents of ships calling at U.S. ports whose routes require them to transit either the northern or southern reporting systems to notify them of this policy.

10. The information from the incoming ship report is valuable in targeting efforts to reduce the threat of ship strikes of northern right whales. It is currently being entered into a database analyzed with Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Once completed, the GIS analysis will be used, among other things, to generate general track lines from the ship reports, which will be used for additional analysis. For example, tracks may be mapped for a particular region and compared among specific weeks or seasons, which may coincide, with significant aggregations of northern right whales. Graphic depiction of principal lanes used by mariners may then help focus survey flights for ship strike reduction efforts or lead to additional mariner awareness programs. Additionally, retrospective analysis of ship traffic relative to the occurrence of northern right whale aggregations in particular in the southeast reporting area will help evaluate the potential risk of ship strikes in an area which has been historically surveyed.

11. The IMO-adopted ship reporting systems are a critical component of a larger effort to educate and work with mariners to address the threat of ship strikes of northern right whales.

This effort and cooperation is vital to the recovery of this highly endangered population. While there is still room for improvement, the reporting systems have been successful. Although some problems with the reporting systems had to be worked out in their initial operation, from the examples given above, it is clear that there is an increased awareness of this issue by mariners. In the two major ports surrounded by the reporting areas, over half of the ships entering port were aware of the systems. The reporting system is also producing valuable data that will allow the targeting of those ships that may remain unaware of the systems or the issue of ship strikes, the analysis of ship traffic relative to the aggregations of northern right whales, and, if necessary, the integration of additional measures and outreach programs to help further reduce the potential for ship strikes.

Conclusion

12. The Sub-committee is invited to note the foregoing information. The United States further requests that Member Governments provide the information in this paper to their shipping communities and thank them for their continued efforts and participation in reducing ship strikes of northern right whales. Further information on this issue and related ongoing efforts is available from U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters (G-OPL), 2100 Second Street SW, Washington, DC 20593 or Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910. Any information on collisions between ships and whales in U.S. waters should be provided to NOAA Fisheries at this address.