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**NOAA Files Final Environmental Impact Statement on Ship Strike Reduction Measures**  
*Agency Seeks to Slow Ships to Protect North Atlantic Right Whales*

NOAA's Fisheries Service is seeking comment on the final environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Ship Strike Reduction Rule. The EIS is one of the final steps in the process to implement a final rule. The ship strike reduction rule aims to reduce the number of endangered North Atlantic right whales injured or killed by collisions with large ships.

The final EIS contains six alternatives, including NOAA's preferred alternative that would require a vessel speed restriction of 10 knots or less in designated areas along the U.S. East Coast. The preferred alternative also includes a five year sunset provision to allow for further consideration of ongoing scientific research.

"NOAA is looking forward to taking a significant step in our efforts to protect right whales," said retired Navy Vice Admiral Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "Our scientific analysis shows that a 10-knot speed limit in critical areas will significantly reduce the threat to these endangered marine mammals."

The 10-knot speed limit would apply to right whale feeding grounds along the coast in the northeastern United States and to calving grounds near the southeastern United States, where the whales spend most of their time. In the mid-Atlantic area where right whales migrate, the 10-knot speed restrictions would extend out to 20 nautical miles around the major ports. NOAA's Fisheries Service researchers report that approximately 83 percent of right whale sightings in the mid-Atlantic were within 20 nautical miles of shore. The preferred alternative also would establish temporary voluntary speed limits in other areas when an aggregation of three or more right whales is confirmed.

With about 300 in existence, North Atlantic right whales are among the most endangered whales in the world. Slow moving right whales are highly vulnerable to ship collisions, since their migration route crosses major East Coast shipping lanes. Along with existing measures to prevent entanglement of right whales in fishing gear, this would be the most comprehensive approach that NOAA has taken to regulate vessel operators in its effort to help right whales recover.

"The bottom line is that this critically endangered species needs our help," said Lautenbacher. "The preferred alternative is a balanced approach grounded in science that would significantly enhance our ability to protect right whales, but it would also take into account concerns about the safety of ship crews and the impact on an important segment of our economy."

The final EIS on the right whale ship strike reduction rule is a step in the process to promulgate a final rule. The rule is part of NOAA's broader ship-strike reduction efforts. Existing protective actions, such as aircraft surveys and mandatory ship reporting systems that provide advisories and information on right whale locations to mariners, will continue. Additional steps include voluntary routing measures, consulting under the Endangered Species Act with federal

agencies on operations of their ships, and an extensive mariner outreach and education program.

NOAA's Fisheries Service is soliciting comments on the final EIS until Sept. 29. After the close of the comment period, NOAA will consider comments it receives and promulgate a final rule expeditiously. The final rule will have an effective date 60 days following publication in the Federal Register.

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On the Web:

NOAA's Fisheries Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

More Info: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/shipstrike/>