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**NOAA FISHERIES RELEASES RECOVERY PLAN FOR
ENDANGERED NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALES
Critically Endangered Right Whale Numbers Less Than 300**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today announced the availability of a draft North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan, an action plan that aims to promote the recovery of the species through a framework of management and research efforts.

"This recovery plan is a valuable tool to help guide right whale management activities and, in particular, address human-caused threats to these rare whales," said Bill Hogarth, Director of NOAA Fisheries. "This is particularly important right now, since we believe that there are less than 300 individuals left in our oceans."

The North Atlantic right whale primarily occurs in coastal or shelf waters. Individuals range from winter calving and nursery areas in coastal waters off the southeastern United States to summer feeding grounds in New England waters and north to the Bay of Fundy and Scotian Shelf. Historically depleted by commercial whaling, the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*) population at present numbers approximately 300 individuals, and is impacted both directly and indirectly by human activities – primarily in the form of vessel collisions and entanglement in fishing gear. These impacts have contributed to a lack of recovery for the species.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA) requires recovery plans to serve as guidelines for action to promote the conservation and recovery of listed species. NOAA Fisheries completed the last recovery plan for the North Atlantic right whale, formerly classified as the Northern right whale, in 1991.

The recovery strategy for the Plan highlights the necessity of reducing or eliminating right whale deaths and injuries from shipping and commercial fishing operations. The Plan also recommends protecting important habitat, monitoring the distribution and abundance of the species, and conducting further genetic studies to assess the health of the species.

In addition, the Plan places priority on identifying and addressing other potential threats to the species, such as contaminants, noise and coastal development. NOAA Fisheries expects to continue working closely with State, other Federal, international and private entities to ensure that such research and recovery efforts are coordinated.

Currently, NOAA Fisheries conducts a multi-faceted effort aimed at reducing human-caused injuries and deaths among North Atlantic right whales. To address the threat of ship strikes, the Agency has developed a comprehensive ship strike strategy that includes operational measures for vessels in U.S. Atlantic waters. In addition, NOAA Fisheries conducts aerial surveys to notify mariners of right whale sighting locations, and operates mandatory ship reporting systems in partnership with the U.S. Coast Guard to provide right whale locations to mariners entering right whale habitat. To address the threat of entanglement in fishing gear, the Agency uses both seasonal and dynamic management tools to reduce the overlap between gear and right whales, works with a multi-stakeholder Take Reduction Team that provides recommendations to reduce fishery interactions, and supports the development of whale-friendly gear modifications. In addition, the agency supports regional Recovery Plan Implementation Teams that provide recommendations to NOAA Fisheries on recovery activities. The draft recovery plan published today provides a framework for these efforts.

Public comments will be accepted for sixty days, from August 30, 2004 to November 1, 2004. Send public comments to: Chief, Marine Mammal Conservation Division, Attn: Right Whale Recovery Plan, Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Comments may also be sent via email to narw.comments@noaa.gov or to the Federal Rulemaking portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> (follow instructions for submitting comments). After consideration of comments and revision as necessary, the agency expects a final Recovery Plan to be available in early 2005.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to providing and preserving the nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

- 30 -

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

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

More Info: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/whaletrp/trt/shipstrike/index.htm>