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NOAA: Ship Speed Restrictions to Protect Endangered North Atlantic Right Whales

NOAA has announced seasonal vessel speed restrictions along the U.S. East Coast where the endangered right whale travels to protect them from being injured or killed by colliding with ships.

The restrictions—the same as imposed last year—require vessels 65 feet or longer to travel at 10 knots or less in key right whale areas, reducing the chances ships will collide with whales.

“These speed restrictions are in place when we know right whales are in certain areas, where they are vulnerable to being hit by ships,” said Eric Schwaab, NOAA Fisheries Assistant Administrator. “We implement speed restrictions every year, based on what our scientists know about the locations and times of year that right whales are calving, feeding and migrating.”

North Atlantic right whales are among the most endangered whales in the world, with only 300 to 400 in existence. Their slow movements and time spent at the surface near the coast make right whales highly vulnerable to being struck by ships. Shipping lanes into East Coast ports cut across their migration routes, making collisions with ships one of their primary threats.

The existing 10-knot speed restriction extends out to 20 nautical miles around major mid-Atlantic ports. According to NOAA researchers, about 83 percent of right whale sightings in the mid-Atlantic region occur within 20 nautical miles of shore. The speed restriction also applies in waters off New England and the southeastern U.S., where whales gather seasonally. A two-page guide to complying with the restrictions and additional information on reducing vessel collisions is available at <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/>.

The seasonal speed restrictions being announced today apply in the following approximate locations from November 1 through April 30, times when whales are known to be in these areas:

- Block Island Sound
- Ports of New York/New Jersey
- Entrance to the Delaware Bay (includes ports of Philadelphia, Pa. and Wilmington, N.C.)
- Entrance to the Chesapeake Bay (includes ports of Hampton Roads, Va. and Baltimore, Md.)
- Ports of Morehead City and Beaufort, N.C., and
- A continuous area from 20 miles from shore between Wilmington, N.C. to south of Savannah, Ga..

In addition, from November 15 through April 15, the same restrictions apply in an area extending from north of Brunswick, Ga. to south of Jacksonville, Fla..

NOAA routinely calls for temporary voluntary speed limits in other areas or times when a group of three or more right whales is confirmed.

Ship speed restriction rules are part of NOAA's broader effort to help the right whale population recover by protecting their habitat. NOAA efforts include surveying whale habitat by aircraft, mandatory ship reporting systems that provide advisories and information on right whale locations to mariners, modified shipping lanes into Boston, recommending shipping routes into other coastal areas to prevent collisions, and regulations to prevent entanglement in fishing gear.

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