



National Marine Fisheries Service

Alaska Region

NEWS RELEASE

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NOAA Fisheries files final rule on northern right whale critical habitat

NOAA Fisheries is designating approximately 95,200 square kilometers (36,750 square miles) of the North Pacific Ocean as critical habitat for the northern right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*). Two specific areas are being designated - one in the Gulf of Alaska and another in the Bering Sea. The rule designating the areas has been filed with the Federal Register and is expected to be published next week.

"These areas were selected because they contain elements that we believe are essential to northern right whale conservation in the Pacific Ocean. Sightings of right whales in the southeastern Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska and locations of right whale calls were instrumental in identifying these important feeding areas," said Doug Mecum, Acting Administrator of the Alaska Region of NOAA Fisheries.

Agency scientists identified the critical habitat based on the locations of right whale sightings since they were listed as endangered in 1973. Four species of plankton were identified as important food sources within the critical habitats that are now designated essential to the conservation and recovery of these whales.

Right whales are large baleen whales which grow to lengths and weights exceeding 18 meters and 100 tons, respectively. They are filter feeders whose prey consists exclusively of zooplankton. Their life expectancy is unclear, but is known to reach 70 years in some cases. Right whales were commercially hunted in the North Pacific Ocean starting in 1835. Legal hunting of the whales continued into the 1950's, with illegal hunting now known to have continued into the 1960's.

In the western North Pacific (the Sea of Okhotsk and adjacent areas), current abundance is unknown, but biologists guess it is probably in the low to mid-hundreds. There is no official estimate of abundance for the eastern North Pacific (Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Gulf of Alaska), but sightings are rare and most biologists believe the current population is unlikely to exceed one hundred individuals.

The final rule designating the critical habitat areas is being issued to meet a deadline established by order of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California.

Comments and materials received, as well as supporting documentation used in the preparation of the final rule on critical habitat for northern right whales in the North

Pacific, are available for public inspection by appointment during normal business hours at the National Marine Fisheries Service, Protected Resources Division, Alaska Region, 709 W. 9th Street, Juneau, Alaska

The final rule, maps, and other materials will also be available on NOAA Fisheries' Alaska Region website <http://www.fakr.noaa.gov/> when the rule is published in the Federal Register. For further information, contact Brad Smith, (907) 271-3023, or Marta Nammack, (301) 713-1401.

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