



Press Release

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WHALES DECIMATED BY SHIP STRIKES NOAA Considering Speed Limits, Buffers and Ship Course Rules in Atlantic Environmentalists Call for Similar Strategy to Protect Whales along West Coast

San Francisco, CA — The National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is considering adopting measures to reduce the growing toll on whale populations from collisions with ships, according to documents released today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) and the Bluewater Network. Among the recommended steps are reduced ship speeds, rerouting and channel restrictions to avoid or minimize ship traffic in sensitive calving, mating and migratory areas.

While NOAA's strategy will likely propose measures to reduce ship strikes of right whales along the Atlantic seaboard, the threat to whales is increasing everywhere due to the massive growth of commercial vessel traffic worldwide. Bluewater Network is advocating for a similar strategy to address the problem in the Pacific, where humpback, gray and fin whales have been struck down in recent years. Just two weeks ago, a large cruise ship struck a whale while passing under the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco Bay.

Fatal collisions with ships have become a leading threat to whale survival. Ship strikes are on the rise, due to a combination of increasing coastal ship traffic, smaller crew size, bigger vessels and faster speeds. Deafening underwater noise levels also prevent whales from hearing approaching propellers:

- Between 20 and 35% of all whales found dead show cuts and blunt trauma consistent with a ship strike;
- Ship strikes are the largest known cause of death for the endangered North Atlantic right whale, particularly calves who have undeveloped diving capability. The risk of ship collision is now also the biggest threat facing the blue whale, the largest mammal on earth; and
- The vast majority of ship strikes are not reported. According to an agency database, 42 of 292 incidents were logged only because whale carcasses were pinned to the prow of ships entering harbors.

The single biggest known source of whale strikes is the U.S. Navy. When combined with the Coast Guard, federal vessels account for nearly one-quarter of reported ship strikes of whales on the planet.

“Our government’s posture can be summed up as, ‘Damn the cetaceans, full speed ahead,’” stated *New England* PEER Director Kyla Bennett, a former federal biologist. “We routinely adopt speed limits and other traffic rules to prevent collisions on our roads but ignore the carnage at sea.”

“As tankers, cruise ships and other vessels get bigger and faster, whales are more likely to get run over,” said Kira Schmidt of Bluewater Network, “Reducing vessel speeds also has the added benefit of decreasing emissions that impair air quality and cause global warming.”

NOAA Fisheries is in the process of developing a “Ship Strike Reduction Strategy” and anticipates publishing the Advanced Notice for Proposed Rulemaking in May. The strategy centers on the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale and involves restricting vessel speeds in designated areas, establishing seasonal buffer zones and concentrating shipping routes into a single course to lessen the likelihood of collisions with whales.

It remains unclear whether the Bush Administration will water down or delete key whale protections under pressure from the shipping industry and affected Eastern seaboard ports.

“We are closely monitoring whether the Bush Administration follows the biology or the politics in making this decision,” commented Bennett, whose organization is considering litigation if effective measures are not taken to reduce ship strikes.

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Read the draft Ship Strike Reduction Strategy (“Recommended Measures to Reduce Ships Strikes of North Atlantic Right Whales”)

<http://www.nero.noaa.gov/whaletrp/trt/shipstrike/finalreport.pdf>

View the National Marine Fisheries Service “Large Whale Ship Strike Database”

http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/press_release/shipstrike03.pdf

Bluewater Network is a national environmental group based in San Francisco that is advocating for slower vessel speeds and special routing in whale habitat, designated whale look-outs, mandatory ship reporting of whale strikes, aerial surveys of whales in shipping channels, low-draft vessel designs, and research into passive sonar technology for locating whales.