
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

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NR02-050
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 23, 2002

**NOAA FISHERIES RESTRICTS GILLNETS OFF GEORGIA AND FLORIDA TO
PROTECT WHALES**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries), an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), has implemented a rule to prohibit the nighttime deployment of gillnet straight sets from November 15 through March 31 each year off the coasts of Georgia and Florida. The rule is intended to reduce the chance of large whales becoming entangled in the gillnets.

Annually from mid-November through March, Atlantic right whales migrate to waters off the Florida and Georgia coast to calve and nurse. The whales' migration exposes them to entanglement in gillnets. In a straight set, the gillnet is placed in a line in the water column. NOAA Fisheries believes that straight set gillnets deployed during daytime are of very minimal threat to whales. The gear is retrieved within about one-half hour of every set, and thus the fisher would be on-site in the possible event of an entanglement. However, straight sets pose a higher level of risk of entanglement to whales at night because they are left in the water for long periods of time and whales are much more difficult to spot in the dark.

The restriction applies to the Southeast U.S. Restricted Area, 27 degrees fifty-one minutes north latitude (near Sebastian Inlet, Fla.) to 32 degrees north latitude (near Savannah, Ga.) extending from the shore seaward to 80 degrees west longitude.

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Since 1996, NOAA Fisheries has sought recommendations from the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team about reducing the incidental take of large whales by commercial fisheries. The team is comprised of fishermen, scientists, conservationists, and state and federal officials who advise NOAA Fisheries about whale conservation and management issues. The team recommended this prohibition to NOAA Fisheries, and the final rule takes into consideration the team's recommendations as well as the public's comments.

"Right whales are the rarest of all large whales and one of the most endangered species in the world," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries. "This regulation will help protect them from becoming entangled in gillnets when they are most vulnerable. We have a mandate under the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act to protect these magnificent animals and this restriction is just one component of a larger effort that NOAA Fisheries has taken to ensure their survival."

Scientists estimate that only about 300 western North Atlantic right whales are alive today. Since 1970 approximately 50 right whales have died, primarily from unknown or natural causes. While approximately 20 have died because they were struck by ships or entangled in fishing gear, not every ship strike or fishing gear entanglement results in a whale's death. Each year scientists document new injuries from fishing gear and ship interactions. Today more than 180 of the remaining Atlantic right whales bear wounds and scars from injuries they suffered during such encounters. Therefore, in addition to implementing this rule, NOAA Fisheries will continue working with the shipping industry and many state and federal partner agencies to minimize right whale injuries and deaths caused by large vessels.

To obtain a copy of the final rule and its Environmental Assessment, please contact Katie Moore of NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region at (727) 570-5312; Diane Borggaard of NOAA Fisheries Northeast Region at (978) 281-9145; or Patricia Lawson of NOAA Fisheries Office of Protected Resources at (301) 713-2322. The final rule may be also be downloaded: http://www.nero.nmfs.gov/whaletrp/st_set.pdf.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.