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NOAA PROPOSES REGULATIONS TO REDUCE RISK OF COLLISIONS BETWEEN SHIPS AND ENDANGERED NORTHERN RIGHT WHALES

NOAA Fisheries Service today published a proposed rule describing regulations to reduce the risk of collisions between North Atlantic right whales and ocean-going vessels. Right whales are among the most endangered species in the world, and are highly vulnerable to ship collisions. The rule proposes vessel speed restrictions along the U.S. east coast, a first in the Agency's long-standing efforts to recover right whales.

"Reducing serious injuries and deaths among right whales due to ship collisions will allow more of these rare animals to reach maturity and to reproduce. That's a key factor for recovery," said Dr. Bill Hogarth, NOAA Fisheries Service Director. "We believe the measures proposed here will make U.S. east coast waters safer for right whales."

The rule proposes a speed restriction of 10 knots or less during certain times in each of three major regions along the U.S. east coast (Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Southeast). These proposed measures are adapted to right whale seasonal occurrence in each area, as well as commercial ship traffic patterns and navigational concerns. Speed restrictions would apply to vessels that are 65 feet in length or greater, except federal agency vessels. The rule also proposes a speed restriction to protect whales that appear in times and places when these seasonal measures are not in effect, through "dynamic management."

These proposed regulations are part of the Agency's larger Ship Strike Reduction Strategy, which recommends continuing existing protective actions, such as a system of aircraft surveys and mandatory ship reporting systems that provide advisories and information on right whale locations to mariners. The Strategy calls for developing a conservation agreement with Canada, consulting under the Endangered Species Act with federal agencies on operations of their ships, and an expanded outreach and education program.

In addition, NOAA Fisheries Service and National Ocean Service developed a proposal to modify key shipping routes into Boston. The proposal, submitted to the International Maritime Organization in April, by the U.S. Coast Guard on behalf of the United States, is expected to have a significant reduction of risks to right whales from ships.

The North Atlantic right whale primarily lives in coastal or shelf waters. Its known range includes winter calving and nursery areas in coastal waters off the southeastern United States, and 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 suffers injury and death from ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear. These events may continue to contribute to the species decline and inability to recover. Biologists believe that there are approximately 300 right whales in the Northwest Atlantic population.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 requires recovery plans to serve as guides to promote the conservation and recovery of listed species. In 2005, NOAA Fisheries Service released a revised North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery Plan that provides an overall framework for promoting recovery of the whale. Measures to reduce risks posed by entanglement in fishing gear are contained in the Agency's Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan.

Written comments on the proposed regulations published today must be sent to NOAA Fisheries Service no later than August 25, 2006.

Send public comments to: Chief, Marine Mammal Conservation Division, Attn: Right Whale Ship Strike Reduction Strategy, Office of Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, Md. 20910. Comments may also be sent via email to shipstrike.comments@noaa.gov or to the federal rulemaking portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> (follow instructions for submitting comments). A copy of the proposed rule can be found at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/>

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service 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. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

NOAA, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce, 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 the nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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On the Web:

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

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

More Info: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/shipstrike/>