



NMFS Northeast Regional Office

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AGENCIES MOVE ON RIGHT WHALE SHIP STRIKE AVOIDANCE

FOURTH RIGHT WHALE FOUND DEAD

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Gloucester, MA -- NOAA Fisheries is organizing a summit among federal agencies to seek immediate voluntary actions that will make East Coast waters safer for migrating and calving North Atlantic right whales. The animals are among the world's most endangered large whales.

"The losses of two pregnant females during 2004 is extremely damaging to this national living treasure," said NOAA Fisheries director, Dr. William T. Hogarth. "NOAA is pursuing a vigorous strategy to reduce human-caused deaths and turn this population around, but that takes time," he said. "What we can do right now is to ask federal ships that operate in the vicinity of right whales to consider additional ways to avoid them."

Hogarth noted that federal ships are a small percentage of overall shipping traffic, but that "a strengthened leadership commitment from federal agencies sends a powerful message on the critical need to reduce the risk of ship strikes."

NOAA Fisheries is the federal agency charged with recovering and protecting marine life listed under the Endangered Species Act, including large whales. NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

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The summit will be organized as a meeting of the NOAA-hosted Interagency Ship Strike Reduction Working Group and include representation from those agencies operating sea-going vessels, including the Departments of Commerce, Defense, Interior, Homeland Security, and the Environmental Protection Agency. The State Department will be included given the international distribution of right whales and ship strike events, and the Marine Mammal Commission included owing to their role oversight role in development of federal marine mammal conservation policies and programs.

The U.S. Navy has also announced that it will issue amplified guidance to its vessels operating in the Mid-Atlantic migration corridor. “We have reviewed NOAA’s draft ship strike strategy, and are committed to working cooperatively with NOAA and others to protect and conserve the highly endangered North Atlantic right whale population,” said Aileen Smith, Natural Resources Manager for the Navy’s Fleet Forces Command. The Navy is a full participant in NOAA’s ship strike reduction implementation teams in both the southeast and the northeast, where there are existing protective measures for right whales.

The NOAA draft ship strike reduction strategy covers the entire East Coast. In the Mid-Atlantic, nine ports were identified where right whales are likely to be present seasonally, and the strategy recommends speed restrictions within 20 to 30 nautical miles of each port during those times.

UPDATE -- Over the weekend, trained whale observers on U.S. Coast Guard flights located the carcass of a North Atlantic right whale southeast of Nantucket Island on Saturday. Bad weather, however, prevented a sea-based scientific team from examining the remains to take samples and perhaps determine the cause of death. The carcass was first sighted and reported on Thursday by a U.S. Coast Guard vessel. Scientists hope to relocate and sample the animal this week.

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The carcass is the fourth confirmed North Atlantic right whale death this year. Earlier this year, a calf beached and died of unknown causes and two pregnant females were killed by ship strikes.

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NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to providing and preserving the nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management, and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries 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.

NOAA 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 our nation's coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

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

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

For more on NOAA's ship strike reduction effort: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/shipstrike/>

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