



NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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NOAA FISHERIES ISSUES FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT ON ATLANTIC LARGE WHALE TAKE REDUCTION PLAN

NOAA Fisheries Service has issued a final environmental impact statement detailing new measures it says will further reduce the risk of entangling large whales along the east coast.

Several species of large whales are subject to entanglement including the Northern right whale, which is also one of the most endangered. Since 1996, NOAA Fisheries Service has been working to eliminate this threat through a program of research, consultation with stakeholders, and regulatory actions. Gear requirements and special management areas have been a large part of this effort.

The preferred action detailed in the final environmental impact statement covers commercial fishing operations that use the types of pot/trap or gillnet gear that are known to, or could, harm large whales.

NOAA's preferred measures would include more trap/pot and gillnet fisheries under the whale protection plan, expand the areas exempted from the plan, and require more markings on fishing gear to improve understanding of how and where entanglements occur. Short duration management areas currently used to protect unexpected aggregations of Northern right whales would be eliminated six months after publication of the final rule. Expanded seasonal area management zones would apply until one year after publication of the final rule, when affected fisheries would be required to use sinking groundline.

The statement identifies NOAA's preferred action to improve the current rules. Other alternatives considered, as well as the reasoning for choosing the preferred one, are also included for comment. NOAA Fisheries Service will consider comments before issuing a final rule. In compliance with a settlement agreement that resolved recent litigation against the agency on this matter, NOAA Fisheries Service will file the final rule with the *Federal Register* on or before October 1, 2007, and it will publish a few days later.

Between 2001 and 2005, NOAA Fisheries Service confirmed 133 entanglement events, 42 ship strikes, and 292 mortalities among large whales along the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. and adjacent Canadian Maritimes. Entanglements were identified as the cause of 26 whale deaths, and ship strikes the cause of 27 deaths.

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.

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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is celebrating 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Commission of Fish and Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our 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 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring 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 Service: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

Atlantic Large Whale Protection Plan: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/whaletrp>