



Contact: Kim Amendola – NOAA
(727) 551-5707
Jess Brown – FWC
(727) 896-8626

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NOAA and FWC Confirm Right Whales off Florida Gulf Coast *Mariners asked to use caution and keep sharp lookout*

NOAA Fisheries Service (NOAA) and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) confirmed a mother and calf right whale pair swimming off Florida's central west coast yesterday. Biologists tracked the whales heading south from Siesta Key to Venice where the whales were last seen approximately two-miles offshore. The United States Coast Guard (USCG) initially spotted the pair Monday morning off Bradenton and reported the sighting to NOAA and Mote Marine Laboratory. All mariners are asked to use caution and keep a sharp lookout for these two animals to avoid a collision, as we are not use to seeing right whales in the Gulf.

Although rare, north Atlantic right whales have previously been reported in the Gulf of Mexico a few times. This mother and calf are believed to be the same pair first sighted off of Corpus Christi, Texas earlier this year on January 16. At that time, the calf showed signs of fresh wounds on its back. The New England Aquarium will verify the identity of these two whales from photos taken by NOAA and FWC.

Barb Zoodsma, NOAA biologist said, "We were very interested in the report of these whales because it gave us the opportunity to verify that these were the same whales first spotted off Texas, their new location, and the condition of the calf." Zoodsma said the whales are getting closer to the Atlantic coast and the calf's condition seems to be improving as the wounds on its back are healing. "We appreciate the USCG and Mote Marine Laboratory giving us the heads up."

North Atlantic right whales spend most of the year off the coast of New England and Canada. From November to April, females migrate down to the south Atlantic coast of the United States to their only known calving (birthing) grounds off of the Georgia and north Florida coasts. There have been two other confirmed sightings of right whales off Florida's Gulf coast prior to this, one off Panama City in the spring of 2004 and the other on March 10, 1963 off Longboat Key – just miles from the location of the most recent sighting.

The North Atlantic right whale is the most endangered large whale off American coasts. After a period of intense whaling in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was on the brink of extinction. Although whaling practices have ceased, right whales face serious risks from ship collisions and entanglements in fishing gear and marine debris. The North Atlantic right whale population is now estimated to be approximately 300 animals and is listed as "Endangered" under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Right whales and all other species of marine mammals are protected under the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. It is illegal to approach or remain within 500-yards of right whales. Mariners are urged to use extreme caution, maintain a sharp lookout, and take prompt action to avoid colliding or approaching this pair of critically endangered whales. NOAA recommends vessels reduce speeds below 12-knots, when consistent with safe navigation. Please report all right whale sightings to USCG via VHF channel 16.

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.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, 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. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes.

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Media Note:

Photos of this right whale pair can be downloaded from:

NOAA Fisheries Service (sea level still photos)

FWC (aerial photos)

Image #1: http://research.myfwc.com/gallery/image_details.asp?id=23074

Image #2: http://research.myfwc.com/gallery/image_details.asp?id=23087

Image #3: http://research.myfwc.com/gallery/image_details.asp?id=23100

***All photos were taken under authorization of NOAA Fisheries Service and Marine Mammal Protection Act permit #932-1489-08