

Proposed new vessel speed regulations to protect North Atlantic right whales

August 1 2022



Snow Cone (#3560) entangled in fishing gear, sighted off the coast of Georgia with her second calf in December 2021. Her first known calf died from a vessel strike off the coast of New Jersey in June 2020. Credit: Georgia Department of Natural Resources taken under NOAA permit 20556

Today, NOAA Fisheries announced proposed changes to vessel speed regulations to further protect North Atlantic right whales from death and serious injuries resulting from collisions—part of a multifaceted

approach to stabilize and recover this endangered population. The changes would expand the current mandatory seasonal speed restrictions of 10 knots or less in designated areas of the ocean and extend to most vessels measuring 35 to 65 feet in length.

In addition, the agency is releasing a draft "roadmap" for public comment about on-demand, or "ropeless" fishing gear that outlines possible ways to increase the use of this technology in [commercial fisheries](#) off the East Coast of the United States. The draft roadmap leverages lessons from fisheries using [on-demand gear](#) that are emerging around the world.

"These two efforts are part of our [North Atlantic Right Whale Road to Recovery](#), a strategy that encapsulates all of our ongoing work across the agency and in collaboration with our partners and stakeholders to conserve and rebuild the North Atlantic right whale population," said Janet Coit, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries and acting assistant secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere at NOAA. "Despite the many challenges we face, including [climate change](#), we must find solutions to mitigate the threats to marine mammals while supporting the livelihoods and economies of our fishing communities who put healthy food on our tables."

For decades, vessel strikes and entanglements in fishing gear have been the two primary causes of right whale injury and death. Researchers found that between 2003 and 2018, in cases where a cause of death could be determined, all juvenile and adult right whale deaths were attributable to human activities. Beyond the first year of life, [right whales](#) are not living long enough to die of natural causes. Scientists declared an "[Unusual Mortality Event](#)" for North Atlantic right whales in 2017, which is defined as a significant die-off of a marine mammal population, requiring immediate response. In just the last two and a half years, at least four vessel strikes have killed or seriously injured North

Atlantic right whales in U.S. waters.

The proposed vessel speed changes would incorporate additional vessels 35 to 65 feet in length and broaden the spatial boundaries and timing of the [seasonal speed restriction areas](#) along the East Coast of the United States. Vessels less than 65 feet in length account for five of the 12 documented lethal strike events in U.S. waters since the first speed rule went into effect in 2008, demonstrating the significant risk this vessel size class presents and the need to extend the speed restrictions to include smaller vessels.

The draft "ropeless roadmap" identifies the status and remaining research and technology needs for on-demand fishing gear, and includes considerations of the economic, safety, operational, regulatory and enforcement challenges and opportunities related to implementing on-demand fishing. On-demand systems provide an alternative to seasonal fishery closures that are used to substantially reduce the risk of [marine animal entanglement](#) in fixed gear trap/pot fisheries. These fisheries typically use rope to connect surface buoys to gear on the ocean floor so it can be retrieved.

The North Atlantic right whale is one of the world's most endangered large whale species. The latest preliminary estimates suggest there are fewer than 350 remaining, with less than 100 reproductively active females. Vessel strikes, [fishing gear](#) entanglements, climate change and other threats all pose challenges to this imperiled species. Working collaboratively, NOAA Fisheries and our partners are dedicated to conserving and rebuilding the North Atlantic right whale population through a variety of innovative techniques to study, protect, and recover these endangered whales.

Provided by NOAA Headquarters

Citation: Proposed new vessel speed regulations to protect North Atlantic right whales (2022, August 1) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-08-vessel-north-atlantic-whales.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.