

Feds want boats to slow down to protect whales

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The Savannah River meets the Atlantic Ocean at Fort Pulaski National Monument, the brick citadel built to guard this port city in the years

before the Civil War.

Yet the river's 47-foot-deep shipping channel extends some 16 miles farther into the deep offshore waters. Known as the Tybee Roads, the wide, straight route is used dozens of times a day by [container ships](#) bound for the Port of Savannah and the much smaller vessels bearing the specially trained captains, called "river pilots," who board the freighters to guide them to the docks.

The waters are also the calving grounds for North Atlantic [right whales](#), a species on the verge of extinction.

Only about 360 of these leviathans—mature adults are about 50 feet long and weigh as much as 70 tons—remain on Earth, and the federal government's environmental science agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, is dedicated to saving and repopulating the species.

In the coming months, NOAA officials are expected to expand a lower boat speed limit imposed on large ships—65 feet and longer—during whale calving season to include vessels as small as 35 feet. The move is meant to curb the number of whale vessel strikes, such as the one reported Wednesday involving a calf. Fishermen spotted the injured newborn off the South Carolina coast swimming with its mother on Jan. 3 and submitted photographs showing wounds consistent with those caused by a boat propeller.

Vessel strikes and fishing gear entanglements have caused the deaths of at least 21 right whales since 2017.

The revised speed limit would apply to the pilot boats and affect the East Coast maritime shipping industry, not just in Savannah and its sister port in Brunswick, but in Jacksonville, Florida; Charleston, South Carolina;

Wilmington, North Carolina; and Norfolk, Virginia.

NOAA's decision on expanding the rule has been pending since June, delayed by objections from maritime industry officials and federal lawmakers, including U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter, a Republican whose district stretches the length of the Georgia coast and includes both the Savannah and Brunswick ports.

Carter has introduced legislation that would delay implementation of the expanded rule. According to a source familiar with Carter's bill, the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is expected to review the legislation this year.

A safety measure?

During a telephone town hall meeting in July, Carter painted the rule expansion as overkill. He labeled the chances of a vessel-whale collision "at one in a million," citing a study commissioned by the American Sportfishing Association. Marine biology experts disagree with the findings of that study, and federal statistics on whale deaths suggest collisions are far more common.

Tybee Island resident Cathy Sakas advocated for the whales for years as the education coordinator at NOAA's Gray's Reef Marine Sanctuary, located off Georgia's coast. She said the whales overcome a lot of adversity to give birth in local waters, swimming 2,000 miles from the New England coast with a 2,000-pound fetus inside them only to face new dangers after their calf is born.

"Would you speed 35 mph through a nursery school?" said Sakas, who retired from her NOAA role in 2014. "It's critically important that we take into consideration that this whale is the most endangered great whale in the world and that this time of year is the most critical time for

the perpetuation of their species."

The Georgia Ports Authority has lobbied Carter and other elected officials against the change on behalf of the river pilots, citing safety reasons. Water conditions offshore can get rough, particularly in the winter months when right whales are calving, and the pilots say speed is vital for the nimble, aluminum pilot boats to counter rolling swells and choppy seas.

The Savannah Pilots Association's three vessels were specifically designed to avoid the speed limit for larger boats. The crafts measure 64.5 feet, are powered by water jet propulsion rather than flesh-piercing propellers, and reach cruising speed at about 20 knots, or 23 mph, much faster than NOAA's proposed 10-knot speed limit for the designated whale calving grounds.

Additionally, pilot boats must typically reach speeds as high as 12 knots to perform the transfer of the captains to and from the cargo ships. The boarding process requires that pilot boats move in quickly beside the freighters, which in rough seas must travel at 8 to 10 knots to maintain steerage and limit the chance of injury to the pilots.

"Operating around the end of the channel at 10 knots or less is a dangerous thing," said Trey Thompson, president of the Savannah Pilots Association. "You'd be like a cork bobbing around, especially in the wintertime, and if you went to boats shorter than 35 feet there'd be many days where you wouldn't even leave the dock."

Georgia Ports Authority CEO Griff Lynch fears expansion of the speed rule would result in frequent suspensions of port activities in the winter because pilots would refuse to service ships in poor weather.

"Everybody's concerned about the right whale, but I think we also have

to be smart about allowing safe passage of these vessels," he said. "If the weather is bad enough where there's a fear of something happening at 10 knots, then nothing is going to happen because they're not going to move the ships."

Drawn to Georgia's waters

Every winter, pregnant right whales swim south from the cold depths off New England to the warmer seas off Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas. Scientists believe the whales give birth in the local waters because temperatures are comfortable for both the mothers, who have plenty of insulating blubber, and babies, who lack the fat.

Right whales calve where they live—near the ocean's surface. They are shallow swimmers, a trait that lent them their name: Whale hunters of the 1800s dubbed them "right" whales because they swim slowly and float when killed, simplifying their harvest.

Their lumbering pace and affection for surface waters also make the whales susceptible to boat strikes. Of the 36 whale deaths recorded between 2017 and 2023, 12 were due to vessel strikes as evidenced by deep wounds from propellers or crushed skulls from hull collisions. An additional 13 carcasses either could not be examined or the cause of death was unknown.

When on the same course, whales often can't move out of the way fast enough. Slowing boats provides captains the time to avoid the whales. According to NOAA research, limiting speeds to 10 knots reduces the risk of vessel strikes by at least 80%. Since the implementation of the 2008 rule for ships longer than 65 feet, smaller vessels have been responsible for approximately 40% of known strikes.

Other lessons learned over the past 15 years went into the proposed rule

revision. The change would expand exemptions—with reporting requirements—for foul weather and other situations that put boat crews in danger. The boundaries of the speed zone would be adjusted under the new rule, as would the time period for the restrictions. In Savannah's waters, the restrictions would be lifted 15 days earlier, on April 15.

Gib Brogan with Oceana, an environmental group focused on the world's oceans, said he expects a NOAA ruling before that end date—and the close of the calving season.

A typical year sees about 20 newborns, and as of Jan. 5, nine mother-calf pairs have been spotted in nearby waters, with three births recorded in a six-day span. An additional 20 individual females have been identified swimming in the area as well, hinting that the coast has the potential to be a busy right whale maternity ward this season.

NOAA estimates recovery will require 50 births a year for many years. The whale population was 500 as recently as 2010. Brogan said getting back there is possible so long as "NOAA's scientists are allowed to do their jobs."

"We are talking about a critically endangered species, one that can recover if we stop killing them," Brogan said. "Slowing boats down in these important habitats is a necessary change."

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