

Vessel Speed Restrictions to Reduce the Threat of Collisions with North Atlantic Right Whales

NOAA/NMFS
Office of Protected Resources



Vessel Speed Restrictions to Protect Right Whales

applies to all vessels >65
feet in length

they are required to
travel 10 knots or less in
Seasonal Management
Areas (SMA)



Vessel Speed Restrictions: Process

- 1 June 2004: NMFS published an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (69 FR 30857) regarding vessel speed restrictions and other measures to reduce the likelihood of deaths and serious injuries to endangered North Atlantic right whales from collisions with vessels.
- 26 June 2006: NMFS published proposed rule (71 FR 36299) to establish vessel speed restrictions to protect right whales.
- 10 October 2008: NMFS published a final rule ([73 FR 60173](#)) that established a ten-knot vessel speed restriction for vessels 65 feet or greater in length in certain locations and at certain times of the year along the east coast of the United States.
 - The rule included a navigational safety exception to account for severe wind and sea conditions; and
 - a December 2013 “sunset” provision.
- 6 June 2013: NMFS published a proposed rule (78 FR 34024) to eliminate the 2008 regulation’s sunset provision.
- 9 December 2013: NMFS published a final rule ([78 FR 73726](#)) that removed the sunset provision.

Vessel Speed Restrictions: Effectiveness

- No vessel strike-related right whale deaths reported in or near active SMAs since the rule went into effect
 - The current stretch is a period that is nearly twice the longest interval between subsequent known vessel collision fatalities in these same areas in an 18-year study period prior to adoption of the rule

Laist, et al. 2014. Effectiveness of mandatory vessel speed limits for protecting North Atlantic right whales. *Endangered Species Research*

* * * * *

- Estimated ship strike risk was 86% lower in periods when speed limits were in effect vs. when they were not
 - risk reduction was 80% for the first 2 years; closer to 90% in the final 2 years

Conn, & Silber. 2013. Vessel speed restrictions reduce risk of collision-related mortality for North Atlantic right whales. *Ecosphere*



Vessel Speed Restrictions: Petition to Amend

- NMFS received a petition from the American Pilots' Association to “exclude federally-maintained dredged channels and pilot boarding areas (and the immediately adjacent waters) for ports from New York to Jacksonville”—which the petitioners indicated is an approximate aggregate area of 15 square miles—from the vessel speed restrictions.
- NMFS's response to the petition is in inter-agency review.



Vessel Speed Restrictions: Ongoing and Next Steps

- Ongoing monitoring and enforcement, including...
 - An assessment every five years
- Ongoing outreach efforts
- *May* consider modifications of the rule, e.g., amending the times/boundaries of SMAs; vessel classes included, etc.

