MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

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Update on Strandings of Large Whales along the East Coast

Humpback Whales

To date, sixteen humpback whales have stranded along the Atlantic coast this winter. These strandings are part of the Humpback Whale Unusual Mortality Event (UME) declared by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) that began in 2016. Forty percent of the whales that could be examined at necropsy (some were inaccessible floating at sea) showed evidence of ship strike or entanglement. Although these strandings have generated media interest and public scrutiny, humpback whale strandings are not new (Wiley et al. 1995) nor are they unique to the U.S. Atlantic coast (Giardino et al. 2022). In fact, ten or more humpback whales have stranded each year during the UME, with a high of 34 in 2017. As the Gulf of Maine stock of humpback whales continues to grow, more young animals are choosing to overwinter along the Atlantic coast where they are vulnerable to being struck by ships and becoming entangled in fishing gear. NMFS recently hosted a media briefing on the recent East Coast whale strandings and the recording and transcript of that briefing are available here together with a Q&A webpage.

Despite several reports in the media, there is no evidence to link these strandings to offshore wind energy development. For more information on offshore energy development and whales, please see this fact sheet produced by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management.

Right Whales

The North Atlantic right whale is one the world's most endangered species of large whale (Moore 2023). On February 12, 2023, a dead North Atlantic right whale stranded on Virginia Beach, Virginia. The whale was identified as a 20-year-old, 43-foot male, catalog # 3343. A multi-agency necropsy was conducted, led by the Virginia Aquarium Stranding Response Program, University of North Carolina, Wilmington, and the City of Virginia Beach's Beach Operations Division. Experts determined the whale suffered a catastrophic blunt force traumatic injury, impacting the vertebral column. The injuries, consistent with vessel strike, included multiple vertebral fractures that would have resulted in death shortly after the injury. The whale was in normal to thin nutritional condition, with no evidence of recent entanglement.

Seasonal Management Areas are in place off all major ports along the Mid-Atlantic, including the Chesapeake Bay, through April 30, 2023. All vessels 65 feet or longer must travel at 10 knots or less in these areas. Additionally, there is an active voluntary SLOW Zone for all vessels off Chesapeake Bay in effect through February 23, 2023. Last year, NMFS introduced proposed changes to vessel speed regulations to expand coverage to include 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.

Human-caused mortality and serious injury, particularly entanglements and vessel strikes, is the greatest threat to recovery of North Atlantic Right Whales (Moore 2023). Today, there are fewer than 350 North Atlantic right whales in existence, with fewer than 95 mature females in the population. An Unusual Mortality Event was declared for North Atlantic right whales in 2017, and currently includes 97 individuals (36 dead, 22 seriously injured, and 39 sub-lethally injured or ill).

Between 2003 and 2018, in cases where a cause of death could be determined, every juvenile and adult right whale death was attributable to human activities (Sharp et al. 2019). After the first year of life, right whales do not live long enough to die of natural causes. In addition, sub-lethal effects of ship strikes and entanglement can impair the growth and reproduction of right whales and further impair their recovery (Moore 2023).

References

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This statement has been updated since original publication (22 February 2023).