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Congresswomen Capps and Brownley Assist GWC Effort to Move California Shipping Lanes to Protect Endangered Blue Whales

Every year between July and October, the world's largest subpopulation of Blue Whales feeds on massive krill blooms along the California coast from San Diego to San Francisco, an area that directly overlaps with one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. Thousands of cargo ships, oil tankers, and cruise ships traverse the same waters as the whales for hundreds of miles, which has led to numerous fatal collisions with blue, finback and humpback whales in recent years. One of the most dangerous areas for the whales lies directly off the coasts of Santa Barbara and Ventura, where shipping lanes cut between the northern Channel Islands and the shore.

More than a decade of discussions between scientists, regulators, and the shipping industry have failed to adequately address the issue for which a simple solution exists: move the shipping lanes further from the coastline and in particular, outside the northern Channel Islands by ~15-20 miles into international waters for the months of July through October when the whales are present in the Santa Barbara Channel in their greatest numbers. A major stumbling block to adopting this solution has been the U.S. Navy's unwillingness to support rerouting the ships because from time to time the Navy conducts exercises in those international waters.

According to Gershon Cohen PhD, co-Director of the GWC: "shipping industry representatives have told us they would be willing to consider moving further from shore if they were confident the Navy wouldn't object to their presence on short notice, which would disrupt their shipping schedules. Some ships have already been ignoring the Navy's objections and sailing through these waters since California required the use of cleaner fuels when traveling near-shore. But the Navy's opposition remains a deterrent for some companies, so we asked Representatives Capps and Brownley, who have been working on the issue for some time, for their help. They submitted a letter today formally asking the Navy to sit down with the industry to discuss how they can meet their needs while increasing the safety of these intelligent, beautiful whales, the largest animals to have ever lived on Earth. We applaud Representative's Capps' and Brownley's leadership and hope the Navy responds quickly and positively - every day the move is delayed increases the risk to the whales' survival." The GWC has long advocated for establishing an alternate shipping lane outside of critical Blue Whale habitat from July-October, which would have no significant impact on the cost of goods or the Navy's ability to ensure national security.

Blue whale populations have failed to rebound despite a near-fifty year ban on commercial hunting: only ~10,000 remain. Collisions with ships in a few critical feeding areas around the world continue to have a significant impact on their numbers. To see recent photos of Blue Whales in harm's way in California waters, and for more information on GWC's work, please contact us through our website or at the email addresses or phone numbers listed below.

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