



For immediate release: 7/16/2012

First Steps Proposed to Protect Blue Whales near San Francisco

Increased protections for blue whales along the coast of California are long overdue, and true protection remains a long way off, but initial, voluntary steps were proposed this week by NOAA with support from the Coast Guard, whale scientists, and the shipping industry.

Blue whales are killed by ship strikes every year while feeding along the coast of California. Massive cargo ships, oil tankers and cruise ships collide with the whales as they transit between the ports of San Francisco and Los Angeles/Long Beach. The current transit lanes are directly aligned with where the whales feed on krill in the mid to late summer months. According to Gershon Cohen PhD, co-director of the Great Whale Conservancy (GWC); "There are about 10,000 blue whales left on the planet – losing any significant number of the remaining population leaves the entire species vulnerable to extinction."

The Great Whale Conservancy is advocating for moving all of the shipping lanes out of critical feeding habitat for the months of August, September and October.

The cost of rerouting the ships further from the coast is estimated to be a few dollars per container. According to GWC co-director Michael Fishbach; "It's a travesty to kill these magnificent beings when saving them would cost pennies for each item in those containers."

Federal regulators and the shipping industry have long been aware of the problem. The ships are so large they fail to see the whales, cannot maneuver out of the way in time when they do see them, and are often unaware they have collided with the whales despite being the largest animals to have ever lived on Earth. As many as five lethal whale strikes have been confirmed in recent seasons, and the real number of deaths may be ten times that number because whales are negatively buoyant and often sink when they die.

Under the new proposal, the ships can opt to place observers on deck to help spot whales near the traffic lanes. The goal is to have the ships use different approaches when large numbers of whales are present near any one approach. It remains to be seen how successful these effort will be because the whales feed throughout the area, many will not be spotted, and changing each ship's approach may take a day or more to coordinate. Even then, avoiding a high-density whale area will be completely voluntary. The most promising part of the proposal, which still needs to be adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), is to extend the north, west, and south shipping lanes further from the coast to reduce the time spent by the ships over the continental shelf edge where huge clouds of krill attract feeding whales.

Plans were also recently forwarded to the IMO to extend one-mile transit lane adjustments to the Channel Islands near Santa Barbara, where many strikes have occurred in recent years. The GWC believe a greater shift, of perhaps 10-15 miles will likely be necessary to significantly reduce the number of strikes in that area.

For more information, please contact the Great Whale Conservancy.