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 High Risk Area for Right Whales Around Provincetown

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The Division of Marine Fisheries and Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies have documented a large and stable aggregation of endangered North Atlantic right whales around Provincetown. A High Risk Advisory is being issued due to the number of whales, their behavior, their proximity to shore and the abundance of zooplankton in the area. Approximately 30 whales were seen sub-surface and surface feeding within 500 yards of the beach, from Race Point to Long Point. Dense concentrations of zooplankton at the surface and just below the surface are attracting the whales to this area. Whales that are surface and subsurface feeding are often difficult to see and at great risk for vessel strike. Vessel strike is a major cause of human-induced mortality for right whales. For the safety of both mariners and whales, **vessel operators in this area are strongly urged to proceed with caution, reduce speed (less than 10 knots), and post lookouts to avoid colliding with this highly endangered whale.**

Based on zooplankton resources collected on March 19, we expect that this aggregation of whales will persist for several more days to perhaps a week. This advisory will be lifted when right whales depart the area.



Federal law prohibits vessels greater than 65 feet in length from exceeding speeds of 10 knots in Cape Cod Bay during this time of year; however right whales are still vulnerable to collision with smaller vessels.

Vessel traffic is expected to increase in this area over the next few weeks with seasonal increases in recreational and commercial fishing, as well as whale watching, and passenger ship activity. Right whales are the most endangered large whale in the North Atlantic, with a population of approximately 450 animals.

Vessels are also prohibited by state and federal law from approaching within 500 yards of a right whale. Massachusetts Environmental Police and U.S. Coast Guard are authorized to enforce the 500- yard rule. Vessels that find themselves within 500 yards of a right whale should slowly and cautiously exit the area.

Management of maritime activities near right whales is part of *Marine Fisheries'* Right Whale Conservation Program. The Right Whale Conservation Program is a cooperative effort between *Marine Fisheries*, the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies (CCS), and the National Marine Fisheries Service to study and protect right whales in Cape Cod Bay. Federal funding for the program comes from the National Marine Fisheries Service and state funding comes from the Massachusetts Environmental Trust.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) issues notices to mariners via the Northern Right Whale Sighting Advisory System (SAS). Participating agencies in the SAS include *Marine Fisheries* and the

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Massachusetts Environmental Police, the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), CCS, and other research groups. Advisories can be viewed at the NOAA Fisheries Northeast Region web site (<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/psb/surveys/>) and are broadcast over NOAA weather radio ([http:// 205.156.54.206/nwr/](http://205.156.54.206/nwr/)).

For more information, visit the *MarineFisheries* website at www.mass.gov/marinefisheries or contact Erin Burke (Erin.Burke@state.ma.us, 978 551-0152) or Dan McKiernan (dan.mckiernan@state.ma.us, 617 626-1536). Center for Coastal Studies (www.coastalstudies.org) right whale researcher Dr. Charles (Stormy) Mayo can be reached at (508) 487-3623.

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