

Offshore Wind Development and Whales

At BOEM, environmental protection – informed by the best available science and law – is a priority and an indispensable consideration in our decision making. Before any activities related to offshore wind development take place, BOEM requires companies to follow strict protective measures, including those to avoid, minimize, or mitigate any potential impacts from our regulated offshore energy activities.

Understanding Large Whale Mortality Events in the Atlantic

The Marine Mammal Protection Act defines an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) as **“a stranding that is unexpected; involves a significant die-off of any marine mammal population; and demands immediate response.”** Since 2017, NOAA Fisheries has declared three active UMEs for baleen whales in the Atlantic Ocean including North Atlantic right whales, humpback whales, and minke whales. Of the whales examined from several of the ongoing UMEs, the leading cause of death is human interaction – specifically from entanglements in fishing gear or vessel strikes, which are long standing threats to these species. Whales feeding in nearshore waters where ship densities are high increases the likelihood of a potential ship strike.



All current evidence indicates that there are no links between large whale deaths and ongoing offshore wind activities, including site characterization surveys.

As part of an active UME investigation, NOAA Fisheries assembles an investigative team, comprised of Stranding Network members and other scientists, to coordinate with the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events to review data, sample stranded whales, and determine the next steps for the investigation.

Commitment to Responsible Offshore Wind Development

BOEM is committed to permitting offshore wind surveys in an environmentally and economically responsible way. The bureau recognizes that offshore wind activities can have potential impacts, so BOEM requires strict protective measures, including:

- **Exclusion zones around vessels:** BOEM requires high resolution geophysical (HRG) survey vessel operators establish an “acoustic exclusion zone” during surveys (500 meters for all endangered whales and 200 meters for other marine mammals). Observers must ensure that this zone is clear of any marine mammals and sea turtles before the sound source is turned on, and the sound source must be turned off if an animal enters the zone.
- **Vessel speed restrictions:** Lessees must adhere to legally mandated vessel speeds, approach limits, and other vessel strike avoidance measures to reduce the risks of impacting North Atlantic right whales.
- **Visual monitoring by Protected Species Observers:** Protected Species Observers are trained, third-party, independent professionals on the lookout for marine mammals to avoid potential vessel strikes and to shut down sound sources if marine mammals enter the exclusion zone.
- **Independent reporting by Protected Species Observers:** Any interactions with protected species must be immediately reported to BOEM and NOAA Fisheries.

Additional Federal Management Actions taken by NOAA

NOAA Fisheries implements federal regulations to reduce the threats of entanglements in fishing gear and vessel strikes with North Atlantic right whale. BOEM consults with NOAA and other federal agencies to assess any additional project-specific mitigation measures that may be needed to further avoid or minimize potential impacts to marine mammals.

For Vessel Strikes:

- Developing right whale alert systems and mandatory vessel reporting systems
- Enhancing emergency response for injured whales
- Modifying international shipping lanes
- Working with stakeholders to develop mitigation measures

For Entanglements:

- Implementing seasonal closures and restricted areas for fixed gear commercial fisheries in areas whales aggregate
- Regulating maximum breaking strength for buoy lines
- Requiring sinking line between trap/pots on the seafloor
- Mandating gear marking to understand where and how whales become entangled
- Requiring weak links in fixed gear fisheries to help whales break free of lines and nets

BOEM will continue to work with its federal and state partners to collect data and explore how sound, vessel and other activities impact whales and other marine mammals. This includes continued monitoring and research, new assessments, adaptive management, and implementing the BOEM and NOAA Fisheries North Atlantic Right Whale and Offshore Wind Strategy, which defines the agencies' goals and key actions for continuing to evaluate and mitigate potential effects of offshore wind energy development on North Atlantic right whales and their habitat.

More information

The following resources are available for reference or more information:



Additional Resources



For More Information: