U.S. – MEXICO – CANADA AGREEMENT

TRANSBOUNDARY NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALE RECOVERY

JULY 2024

BACKGROUND

The North Atlantic right whale (right whale) is among the world's most endangered whale species, with approximately 360 animals remaining, including fewer than 70 reproductively active females. Before the twentieth century, commercial whaling brought the species to the brink of extinction. While whaling is no longer a threat, they have never fully recovered, and human activities still present the greatest danger to the species. The species was increasing between the mid 1990s and 2010, which demonstrates that recovery is feasible. However, increases in human-caused deaths and reduced reproduction that began most recently around 2010 have caused the species to decline once again. Elevated right whale deaths in 2017 led NOAA Fisheries to declare an Unusual Mortality Event (UME), which is ongoing. Deaths and injuries remain elevated, and many right whales are in poor body condition, with the primary causes being entanglements in fishing gear and vessel strikes. In fact, since the 1970s, all documented right whale deaths (excluding newborns) where the cause of death could be determined have been attributed to human activities; individuals are not living long enough to die from old age.

Photo by NOAA Fisheries and DFO

To mitigate threats and promote recovery of the species, both the U.S. and Canada must continue to work together. Collaborative efforts between the two countries include work on the UME investigation as well as sharing information on new technologies and data sharing. Through this USCMA initiative, NOAA Fisheries, in collaboration with the Government of Canada, is continuing and expanding these efforts to address threats and monitor right whales across their North American range. This multi-year effort started in February 2021 and included supplemental funds in December 2023 to support additional efforts related to right whale recovery.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on the Government of Canada's domestic efforts to address threats to North Atlantic right whales, please visit:

Government of Canada: North Atlantic Right Whale

Protecting North Atlantic Right Whales From Collisions With Vessels in the Gulf of St. Lawrence

For more information on U.S. domestic efforts to address threats to North Atlantic right whales, please visit:

NOAA Fisheries: North Atlantic Right Whale Road to Recovery

Photo by NOAA Fisheries and DFO

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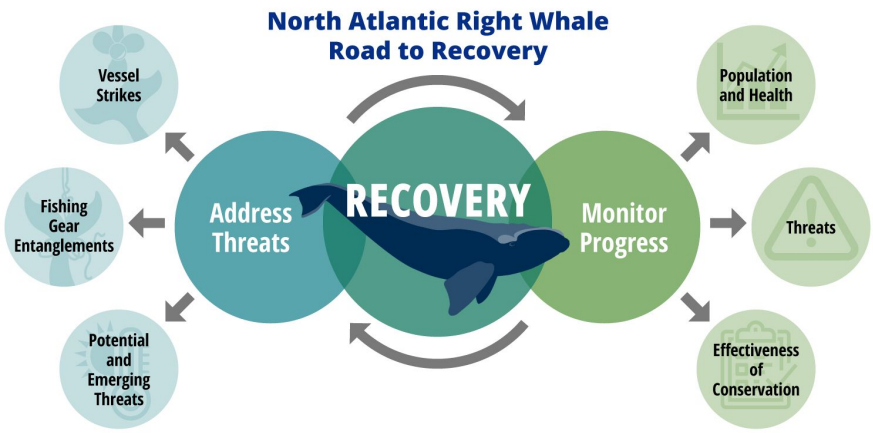
NOAA FISHERIES

MAIN OBJECTIVES

The USMCA North Atlantic right whale project is a U.S.-Canada effort to promote right whale recovery across their North American range by enhancing transboundary monitoring of right whales to improve our understanding of vessel strike and entanglement risk and further the development of innovative fishing gear technologies to reduce the risk of entanglement in both Canadian and U.S. fishing gear. This project relates to USMCA 24.8 (Multilateral Environmental Agreements), 24.12 (Marine Litter), 24.18 (Sustainable Fisheries Management), and 24.19 (Conservation of Marine Species) and will promote healthy marine mammal populations and long-lasting, sustainable fisheries practices that mitigate potential harm to non-target cetacean species.



GOAL 1

Improve transboundary understanding of North Atlantic right whale distribution through passive acoustic monitoring, aerial and vessel based surveys, and habitat-based distribution modeling.

Actions for Years 1–4

- Establish new priority passive acoustic monitoring sites to provide additional information on right whale habitat use in the Gulf of Maine region.
- Conduct aerial surveys in the Gulf of St. Lawrence to provide data on right whale use of this area, including residency and determining which right whales migrate here.
- Develop range-wide, habitat-based distribution models for right whales to be used by both the Canadian and U.S. government for management and recovery.
- Support collaborative vessel-based data collection and analytical tool development to better understand right whale foraging ecology and distribution relative to prey distribution.

Key outcomes so far:

- Collected 24 months of right whale acoustic recordings at the 11 newly established priority sites for Passive Acoustic Monitoring in the Gulf of Maine, including 10 new sites in U.S. waters and one site in Canadian waters.
- Conducted aerial survey monitoring of right whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in coordination with Canada from 2021-2023, which included 38 surveys and 345 right whale sightings.
- Following a workshop in December of 2022, initiated development of two transboundary right whale distribution models across their North American range.

GOAL 2

Improve transboundary efforts to monitor and understand right whale health by strengthening U.S.-Canada stranding response, necropsy, and entanglement response coordination, improving and increasing health assessments and monitoring efforts, and synthesizing information on right whale injuries from anthropogenic interactions in both U.S. and Canadian waters.

Actions for Years 1–4

- Establish a right whale necropsy case review committee, host a transboundary necropsy workshop, and develop virtual training modules.
- Support the development of a web-based anthropogenic event database to provide comprehensive information on right whales injuries to inform management activities in both countries.
- Conduct a detailed assessment of right whale injuries to better inform U.S. and Canadian management efforts.
- Improve entanglement response capabilities across the species range by providing equipment and training to response partners.
- Improve, coordinate, and standardize right whale health assessment efforts.

Key outcomes so far:

- Through the newly established transboundary right whale necropsy case review steering committee, and following the October 2022 transboundary necropsy workshop, enhanced the necropsy coordination and process and conducted necropsy case reviews.
- Developed storyboards and identified paths for three necropsy virtual training modules.
- Began developing a web-based injury events database to inform an assessment of anthropogenic injuries, with initial data collected through monitoring surveys.

Necropsy Team Members from the International Fund for Animal Welfare, Atlantic Marine Conservation Society, Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative, Center for Coastal Studies, Marine Mammals of Maine, New England Aquarium, Whale & Dolphin Conservation, and Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center. Necropsy of North Atlantic right whale #5120. NOAA Fisheries Permit #24539.

GOAL 3

Further the development of innovative fishing gear technologies to reduce the risk of entanglement in U.S. and Canadian fisheries.

Actions for Years 1–4

- Hold regular meetings with NOAA Fisheries and Fisheries and Oceans Canada to share challenges and successes related to fishing gear systems.
- Collaborate with Canada to identify and test commercially available weak rope and insertions for relevant fisheries. Make available descriptions of weak rope and insertions approved for use.
- Coordinate efforts to assess the relative success and failures of different on-demand fishing systems to increase competition and reduce redundancy in the development and assessment of on-demand fishing systems, including geolocation marking.

Key outcomes so far:

- After testing and evaluating numerous weak ropes, links, and inserts, provided all sectors of the U.S. trap/pot fishing industry options for fishing with weak rope, including in offshore areas.
- Provided U.S. fishermen access to on-demand (or "ropeless") fishing systems by expanding NOAA Fisheries' Gear Library lending program, which includes 480 systems as of March 2024, to improve the understanding of on-demand gear technologies and provide manufacturers criteria for improvement.
- Furthered the development and use of on-demand fishing gear, including efforts to address geolocation and gear conflict issues.
- Supported trials for numerous non-tended, fixed gear fisheries with initial voluntary adoption of lower breaking strength gear in lobster fisheries in eastern Canada.
- Supported trials of on-demand gear in snow crab, lobster, and whelk fisheries in eastern Canada. This includes government of Canada support for the CanFISH gear lending program.