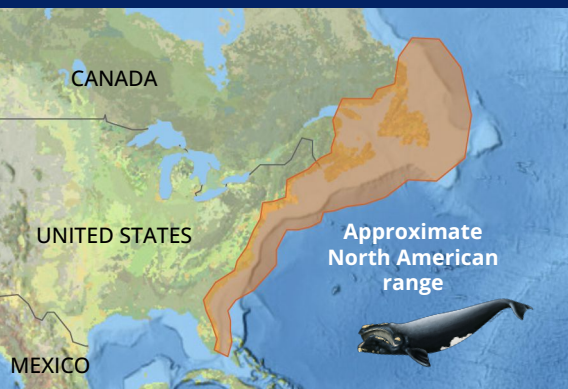


U.S. – MEXICO – CANADA AGREEMENT TRANSBOUNDARY NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALE RECOVERY

JULY 2023



BACKGROUND

The North Atlantic right whale (right whale) is among the world's most endangered whale species, with fewer than 350 animals remaining and likely fewer than 70 breeding 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 are causing the species to decline once again. Elevated right whale deaths in 2017 led NOAA Fisheries to declare an [Unusual Mortality Event](#), 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.



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 Unusual Mortality Event 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 North Atlantic right whales across their North American range.



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](#)



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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 further our understanding of vessel strike and entanglement risk and furthering 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 do not harm non-target species.



GOAL 1

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

Actions for Years 1–3

- Establish new 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 a range-wide, habitat-based density distribution model for right whales to be used by both the Canadian and U.S. government for management and recovery.

Key outcomes so far:

- Established and deployed moorings at 11 new priority sites for Passive Acoustic Monitoring in the Gulf of Maine, including 10 sites in U.S. waters and one site in Canada waters.
- Provided continued coordination and support with survey methods and photo-identification of North Atlantic right whales in Canadian waters, and completed aerial surveys in the Gulf of St. Lawrence in late-fall 2021 and 2022, and in early spring of 2022.
- Convened a species distribution modeling workshop in December of 2022 with leading experts from both the U.S. and Canada, to initiate a transboundary collaboration aimed at developing distribution models for North Atlantic right whales across their North American range.



GOAL 2

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

Actions for Years 1–3

- Establish a right whale necropsy case review committee to review and share information on cause of death as well as threat identification to inform management activities in both countries.
- Host a transboundary necropsy workshop and develop virtual training modules to enhance the skills of team leaders, ensure consistency in necropsy procedures, and train additional necropsy teams.
- 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.

Key outcomes so far:

- Established a transboundary right whale necropsy case review steering committee and made progress on defining data needed for real-time and annual virtual necropsy case reviews.
- Convened a transboundary necropsy workshop in October 2022 focused on enhancing large whale necropsy coordination and processes between and within countries.
- Worked to initiate the development of a North Atlantic right whale injury events portal, which is helping to inform an assessment of vessel strike injuries, and engaged with both U.S. and Canada stakeholders and other interested parties.

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 1–3

- Hold regular meetings with NOAA Fisheries and Fisheries and Oceans Canada to share challenges and successes related to fishing gear systems.
- Identify successfully tested and commercially available weak rope and insertions for relevant fisheries.
- Collaborate on weak rope, weak insertions, and sinking groundline research and technology transfer.
- Coordinate efforts to reduce costs and redundancy in the development and assessment of ropeless fishing systems.

Key outcomes so far:

- Tested and approved numerous weak ropes, links, and inserts under the new requirements for the 2021 modifications to the NOAA Fisheries Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan.
- Furthered the development of on-demand (or “ropeless”) fishing gear including efforts to address geolocation and gear conflict issues, for example through NOAA Fisheries’ Gear Library lending program, which provides fishermen access to on-demand systems to improve their understanding of the technology and provides manufacturers important feedback from fishermen to improve these systems.

