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Proposed Whale Protections Prompt Concerns Over Safety, Effectiveness

CAI | By [Eve Zuckoff](#)

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Fishermen and conservationists are expressing safety concerns and doubts about the effectiveness of proposed regulations to protect North Atlantic right whales from entanglement in fishing gear.

Last night, at the first of four public hearings on the proposed rules, officials from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reported that the [new regulations](#) would introduce state-specific gear marking colors, impose seasonal fishing closures in up to two new areas, including one south of Nantucket, and mandate fishermen add more traps per trawl, a measure fishermen called “burdensome” and “dangerous.”

“If we must extend the number of traps, we end up spending quite a bit of time at the stern of the boat stacking the traps,” explained fisherman Peter Brodeur. “This reduces safety of the operation especially since there’s no one to throw that life ring to us if we fall off.”

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The new rules would also require the use of weaker rope designed to break under the strength of an adult right whale, which several conservationists objected to.

“The proposed measures are based on outdated information that will not protect the right whale in the short or long term or long term,” said Rachael Thompson, executive director of the Glynn Environmental Coalition. She doubted the efficacy of weak rope when it comes to reducing risk for juvenile whales and other endangered marine species. So by now, she added, the agency should be doing more to experiment with “ropeless” fishing techniques.

The new rules would modify existing seasonal restricted areas to restrict buoy lines, but allow [ropeless fishing](#) for fishermen with appropriate permits.

The stakes for these whales were raised over the weekend, when a North Atlantic right whale calf was found dead off the coast of Florida. Results from a necropsy have yet to be analyzed, but aerial images of the male calf appear to show deep gashes from the blades of a propeller, indicating that the young male was struck by a boat.

“The most obvious wounds on the calf are the propeller wounds across the back,” noted Scott Landry, who oversees whale disentanglement efforts at Provincetown’s Center for Coastal Studies. “More subtle are the propellers that go right through the calf’s head. So I would hope that its death was very quick at the very least.”

This is the second dead right whale calf of the season. Those two dead calves were among 16 born in the last few months, adding to a total species population of around 360.

In his comments, Patrick Ramage, a conservationist with the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), noted that the NOAA proposals would only reduce right whale deaths and injuries by 64 percent, which he said isn't enough. Officials could have pursued measures leading to an 80 percent reduction in risk, he said.

"Shooting for 64 percent doesn't meaningfully or sufficiently reduce risk and in fact leads arguably to a more uncertain and risky environment both for right whales and for folks who make their living on the water in terms of likely needing to move to more aggressive measures over time," he said.

In the first year, these protections are estimated to cost the fishery from \$7 million to \$15 million, or about 1 percent to 2 percent of the annual value of the lobster fishery, according to NOAA.

The [next public hearing](#) begins tonight at 6:30 p.m., and will focus on how the proposed requirements will affect fishermen on the Outer Cape and in New Hampshire. Those who can't make the hearings can [send public comments through an online portal](#).

After considering public feedback, federal officials plan to announce whether these proposed protections will go into effect by the summer.

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Eve Zuckoff is WCAI's Report for America reporter, covering the human impacts of climate change.

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