



NOAA Must Press Pause on Its Atlantic Coast Vessel Speed Restrictions

By Frank Hugelmeyer

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From inland lakes to the Atlantic seaboard, America's recreational boating and fishing industry has seen extraordinary growth since the onset of the pandemic and continues to be a boon to local and regional economies. As the nation's original conservationists, recreational boaters and anglers have long shown a strong commitment to the stewardship of our waterways and understand the importance of protecting the wildlife – often leading the fight for better ocean management. However, a misguided and hastily written new rule poses serious consequences to boaters, anglers, and our \$170 billion industry. Without serious revisions, the proposed regulation will devastate local economies, harm numerous small businesses, and eliminate thousands of jobs up and down the east coast of the United States.

In an effort to protect the endangered North Atlantic right whale population, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) proposed recent changes to vessel speed regulations, imposing unprecedented speed limits along virtually the entire Atlantic coast. The marine industry shares NOAA's goal of protecting the right whale population and strongly supports existing measures previously put in place to preserve this species. However, the agency's new sweeping proposal failed to solicit input from a variety of impacted stakeholders, and in turn, severely underestimates the financial impacts that the rule will have on the largest contributing sector to America's outdoor recreation economy.

Driven by the recreational boating and fishing industry, outdoor recreation is a major contributor to the U.S. economy, generating \$689 billion in annual economic output, nearly 2 percent of U.S. GDP, and 4.3 million American jobs. Each year, more than 100 million Americans enjoy boating and nearly 50 million Americans fish. Left unchanged, this drastic proposal would curtail thousands of boating and fishing trips each year. The industry's economic reach is too great to ignore and without a more deliberate approach to this rulemaking process, the paychecks and jobs of many Americans are at risk.

Essentially, NOAA's proposal would dramatically broaden the current 10-knot (about 11.5 miles per hour) speed restriction to include vessels 35 feet and larger, down from 65 feet. Expanding the mandatory speed restriction will mean that 63,000 registered boats along the Atlantic coast will be impacted – far more than the agency's flawed estimate of 9,200 vessels. Furthermore, the agency proposes extending these "go-slow zones" as far as 90 miles from shore, including thousands of square miles of the ocean where right whales have not been observed in decades or ever. This bizarre blanket regulatory approach will bring recreational boating and fishing trips to a screeching halt, as vessels routinely travel dozens of miles from shore to enjoy a day of fishing.

In addition, these proposed changes would exacerbate existing enforcement challenges by requiring law enforcement agencies to monitor tens of thousands of individual watercraft across a massive swath of the Atlantic Ocean. By NOAA's own admission, there is not ample funding or resources to enforce the current 10-knot speed restriction for vessels 65 feet in length and greater. Instead of moving forward with these drastic measures, NOAA should consider incremental steps, including better enforcement of existing regulations.

North Atlantic right whales are a vital part of our shared ocean ecosystem, which is why the National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA) strongly supports efforts to educate boaters on best practices to ensure aquatic mammals are kept safe. Our community has a proven track record of effectively partnering with the

Biden administration to develop policies that achieve a thoughtful and balanced approach between conservation and recreational access for consumers.

We can, and should, protect the North Atlantic right whale – and this can be achieved without jeopardizing America's irreplaceable recreational boating industry. We ask that the administration press pause on its proposed rule to incorporate stakeholder feedback and correct data from the industry as we determine the best path forward to achieve our shared goal of protecting the North Atlantic right whale.

Frank Hugelmeyer is president & CEO of the National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA), the nation's largest trade association representing the \$170 billion recreational boating and fishing industry.

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