

# North Atlantic right whales could become extinct, US officials say

- Noaa scientist: ‘You do have to use the extinction word’
- Study suggests whales leave protected areas to feed



*A rare North Atlantic right whale calf lies dead on a beach in Chatham, Massachusetts in 2016. Photograph: AP*

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US federal officials say it is time to consider the possibility that North Atlantic right whales could become extinct, unless new steps are taken to protect them.



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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa) has said there are only about 450 North Atlantic right whales left and 17 have died in 2017.

The situation is so dire that US and Canadian regulators need to consider the possibility that the population will not recover without action soon, said John Bullard, north-east regional administrator for Noaa Fisheries.

The [high year of mortality](#) is coinciding with a year of poor reproduction. There are only about 100 breeding female North Atlantic right whales left.

“You do have to use the extinction word because that’s where the trend lines say they are,” Bullard said. “That’s something we can’t let happen.”

Bullard and other Noaa officials made the comments during a meeting this week of the regulatory New England Fishery Management Council. Mark Murray-Brown, an Endangered Species Act consultant for Noaa, said right whales have been declining in abundance since 2010, with females hit harder than males.

The US and Canada must work to reduce the human-caused deaths of the whales, Murray-Brown said. Vessel-strikes and entanglement in fishing gear are two frequently cited causes of the whales’ deaths.

“The current status of the right whales is a critical situation and using our available resources to recover right whales is of high importance and high urgency,” he said.



*A North Atlantic right whale dives, near a New England Aquarium research boat. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo*

The animals give birth in temperate southern waters and then head to New England and Canada every spring and summer to feed. All of this year's deaths were off New England and Canada.

Some recent scientific studies have shed some light on why whale deaths have increased. One, published in the journal *Nature Scientific Reports*, stated that the whales move around much more than previously thought. Some scientists have posited that whales might be venturing outside of protected areas in search of food, putting themselves in harm's way.

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In another study, published last month in the journal *Endangered Species Research*, scientists examined right whale feces and found whales that suffer long entanglements in fishing gear produce hormone levels that indicate high stress. The stress negatively impacts their ability to reproduce even when they survive entanglement, scientists said.

“My colleagues are trying to find solutions so we can find out how they can continue to fish but not entangle whales,” said a study co-author, Elizabeth Burgess, an associate scientist with the Anderson Cabot Center for Ocean Life at the New England Aquarium in Boston.

A five-year NOAA review of right whales released in October said the animals should remain on the endangered list. It also included recommendations to protect the species including developing a long-term plan for monitoring the population trends and habitat use and studying the impact of commercial fishing on right whales.

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