

# Vessels must hit the brakes, not right whales

By Jessica Redfern

Massachusetts marks its second annual Right Whale Day on April 24. This day is an opportunity to educate the public about the plight of this critically endangered species — the state's official marine mammal, of which less than 360 remain — and to highlight the research and conservation work happening to protect these animals. This day comes as the situation facing North Atlantic right whales in U.S. waters is particularly dire.

The heartbreaking irony for North Atlantic right whales was highlighted when the first sighting of a healthy right whale calf and its mother in Cape Cod Bay occurred in the same week that another new right whale mother was reported dead off Virginia's coast. The mother, known as Catalog #1950, suffered catastrophic and gruesome injuries that were later confirmed to be caused by a vessel strike that completely dislocated her spine and fractured all vertebrae in her lower back. She also leaves behind her

sixth calf, which is expected to die without its mother's care.

This marks the third right whale death from a vessel strike this year, and we should not accept this as inevitable. There is a viable solution that could go far in protecting right whales.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has proposed modifications to the existing federal vessel speed rule, including expanding time periods and size of seasonal speed zones; extending speed restrictions to include most vessels measuring over 35 feet; and implementing mandatory, instead of voluntary, restrictions in dynamic speed zones, which are established when and where right whales are observed and are likely to remain.

The New England Aquarium is steadfast in its call for the federal government to issue the revised vessel speed rule, which has been the subject of extensive review by various government agencies over the past 18 months. The delay of these protective measures has put this critically endangered species at continued risk. To increase

the species' chance of survival, speed restrictions need to be implemented immediately.

Vessel strikes are not the only risk these vulnerable whales face as they swim along the East Coast, heading north from calving grounds in Florida and Georgia to the Canadian Maritimes where many spend the summer months. Fishing gear entanglements have affected more than 85% of North Atlantic right whales, ensnaring their tails, mouths, and flippers and impeding their ability to eat, breed, and live long lives. One whale died in February due to entanglement, and just last week, an entangled right whale was spotted 50 miles off Block Island, R.I., with rope coming out of both sides of its mouth. The work being done by state and federal agencies, industries, and other partners to increase the use of ropeless fishing gear and fishing lines that snap more readily when whales encounter them is promising and deserves further study. These emerging methods will save whale lives.

On this Right Whale Day, let's celebrate this iconic species



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A North Atlantic right whale surfaces on Cape Cod Bay last March.

and the births of 19 calves this year. With every birth, there is hope for their survival. But as we celebrate, we ask that you join us in calling for action to reduce the two main threats they face — vessel strikes and entanglements — before it is

too late.

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## Air quality

# U.S. isn't ready for more wildfire smoke

By Mark Gongloff

Many Americans were surprised last year when smoke from wildfires hundreds of miles away turned their air toxic. There's no excuse for anybody to be surprised when it happens again — possibly in just a couple of months.

Canada's emergency preparedness minister has warned repeatedly that an unusually dry and warm winter, combined with what might be an unusually dry and warm spring and summer, could lead to another terrible wildfire season.

It's hard to imagine a Canadian wildfire season more explosive than last year's, which burned a record 15 million hectares, more than seven

times the annual average. Dozens of those fires kept burning through the winter, even under the cover of snow. (These are known as "zombie fires," a phrase that joins "firenado" and "thundersnow" in the growing lexicon of freak-weather terms you wish you'd never heard.)

Where there's fire, there's smoke, as the saying sort of goes; and wildfire smoke will be one of the most noticeable ways climate change threatens human health in the years to come. It could cause as much as 27,800 US deaths per year by 2050, according to a new study in the National Bureau of Economic Research, with an annual economic cost of \$244 billion.

Children, senior citizens and people with asthma and other

underlying health issues can be harmed by relatively low concentrations of wildfire smoke. But the stuff is such a toxic stew of chemicals, delivered in particles small enough to enter the bloodstream, that even the healthiest of us should avoid it.

It caught millions off guard in New York and many other places in the eastern part of the U.S. last spring and summer, when Canadian wildfire smoke temporarily gave American cities some of the unhealthiest air on the planet.

New York officials were accused of waiting too long to warn about the danger when the smoke hit in early June, leaving people exposed and uninformed about how to respond. New York and many other cities lacked the kind of

contingency plans their West Coast peers developed long ago, including protections for outdoor workers and designated places where people can go to breathe clean air.

A year later, much of the country still isn't ready for another smoky summer. Democrats in Congress last year introduced two bills to address the problem on a national level: the Wildfire Smoke Emergency Declaration Act and the Smoke and Heat Ready Communities Act. The first would give the president power to declare a "smoke emergency," which would open government purse strings to help relocate and shelter affected people and reimburse businesses for losses. The second would use the EPA to help communities prepare

for both wildfire smoke and extreme heat, including public messaging campaigns.

Passing these bills should have happened months ago.

The easiest fix of all is for public officials to broadcast widely and often about the dangers of smoke and how to avoid it. It's not rocket science: Shun the outside air, preferably by staying in a room with a HEPA filter; recirculate the air in your car; and wear some kind of mask, preferably an N95, when you must venture out.

Fire season is coming sooner than you might think.

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