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Update on USWTR Surveys off Jacksonville, Florida

Contributed by William A. McLellan, University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Survey effort continues at the proposed Undersea Warfare Training Range (USWTR) off the coast of Jacksonville, Florida. The aerial survey effort that began in January 2009 is designed to cover the 10 track lines on the site at least twice per month and extra effort has been made to conduct additional aerial surveys during the right whale calving season. Additionally, shoulder data were collected during November 2009 in the form of on-effort transit legs to and from the survey site. Once the EWS right whale surveys end, shoulder data will be collected again through May 2010. To date, 185 USWTR track lines (approximately 16,000 km or 8,600 nautical miles) have been flown.

Vessel survey effort that began in July 2009 takes place on the same track lines. Prior to the start of the right whale calving season a protocol was adopted for the research vessel when operating in right whale habitat. The vessel slows to 12 knots and posts watches while underway during daylight. Through January 2010, 14 vessel surveys have been conducted.

A towed hydrophone array is deployed during vessel surveys to obtain simultaneous visual and acoustic data. Additionally, two High-frequency Acoustic Recording Packages (HARPs) are deployed at the USWTR site and are collected, downloaded and re-deployed every six months.

No right whales have been sighted during any survey effort in the USWTR site. Right whales have been observed during vessel and aerial transits through the Right Whale Critical Habitat (RWCH). When right whales are observed from the plane during transit through the RWCH, observers note the location but the plane does not break track or descend from its agreed-upon 3000 ft. transit altitude. When encountered during vessel transits, location and ID photographs are obtained. Other species of marine mammals have been observed in the USWTR site including the minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), which was encountered during January

and February 2009. Several odontocete species have been encountered during aerial and vessel surveys, with Atlantic spotted dolphins (*Stenella frontalis*) being the most commonly observed species, followed by bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), Risso's dolphins (*Grampus griseus*), rough-toothed dolphins (*Steno bredanensis*), and dwarf or pygmy sperm whale (*Kogia* sp.). In addition, short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) were encountered during off-effort transit through the USWTR survey area.

Nuclear Aircraft Carrier for Mayport?

Mayport Naval Station may become the homeport for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Mayport is located in northeast Florida, east of Jacksonville, near the junction of the St. Johns River and the Atlantic Ocean (and adjacent to right whale critical habitat). Justification for the proposed move is distribute the fleet so as to avoid the type of event that occurred at Pearl Harbor—given as an example of what can happen if ships are concentrated in one port. Mayport has hosted carriers in past years. In 2007, the conventionally-powered *USS John F. Kennedy* was decommissioned, and Mayport has been without a carrier since. Under the proposed plan, it would take 5 years to improve or build the required infrastructure. This would include building new facilities and dredging the river. Political views are mixed. City and state politicians advocate the move. However, Virginia politicians, concerned about losing the ship and the sailors, oppose the plan.

For more information: www.mayporthomeportingeis.com/EISDocuments.aspx.

Fishing News: Gear Research Exemption

The Pemaquid Fishermen's Cooperative Association has applied for an Exempted Fishing Permit to allow testing of fixed fishing gear with no vertical lines on the northern edge of Jeffrey's Ledge in the Gulf of Maine. The work is intended to assist NMFS and the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team (ALWTRT) in their efforts to address the entanglement threat of vertical lines in fixed fishing gear to large whales (including right whales). Comments on the application are due prior to 5 March 2010 and may be submitted to Patricia A. Kurkul, NMFS, Northeast Regional Office, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930-2298, or electronically to ALobster@noaa.gov. In both cases, mark correspondence clearly "Comments-Lobster EFP Proposal." The Pemaquid Fishermen's Cooperative Association has previously been involved in gear research (*e.g.*, weak links). For further information, see Federal Register, 18 February 2010 (Volume 75, Number 32), pages 7227-7228.

RIGHT WHALE NEWS

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The 2010 SEUS Calving Season: Will Good Weather Result in Additional Mother-Calf Sightings?

*Contributed by Katie A. Jackson,
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission*

As of mid-February, we have reached the middle of the 2010 North Atlantic right whale calving season and despite long periods of high winds and rough seas the survey teams have detected over 120 individual right whales in the coastal waters of the southeast U.S. Water temperatures are noticeably cooler than in recent winters and it appears right whale distribution may have shifted south as a result. Large concentrations of whales have been observed between Jacksonville and Matanzas Inlets and nearshore Flagler Beach, Ormond Beach, and Ponce Inlet in comparison to recent winters when whales were more commonly sighted between Savannah, GA, and Jacksonville, FL. The vast majority of these whales are juveniles including approximately thirty-five 2008 and 2009 season calves.



Juveniles are common in the 2010 SEUS season. These are two yearlings, the 2009 calf of 1151 “Mavyne” (left) and the 2009 calf of 1503 “Trilogy” (right). (Photo: 19 January 2010, 12 miles off the St. Augustine Inlet, Corey Accardo, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission)