



MAINE

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THE MAINE LOBSTER INDUSTRY'S EFFORTS TO PROTECT WHALES

Most Maine lobstermen have never observed a right whale, but have an excellent track record of complying with current conservation standards. In fact, the Maine Department of Marine Resource's Marine Patrol reports 99% compliance with all whale requirements of the Large Whale Reduction Plan.

For nearly a decade, Maine's lobster industry has actively participated in a number of efforts to protect Right Whales. From being involved in research activities to the development of new gear, lobstermen have been at the forefront of seeking best practice methods to insure the safety of the whales.

These efforts began as early as 1997 when the Maine lobster industry became an active member of the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team (TRT) and began participating in TRT and other meetings such as the Gear Advisory Group and Low Profile Rope Workshops. Throughout this process, the MLA has attended public hearings, obtained legal services to assist with commenting on the rules, and special meetings were organized with NMFS Director, Bill Hogarth, in 2005 and 2006 to discuss the 2005 Proposed Rule.

Finally, education and outreach to the lobster industry on the Whale Plan has been ongoing through the MLA newsletter and other member communications.

A cornerstone of the Maine lobster industry's participation has been the research and development of new gear to reduce entanglement risk to large whales. Efforts began in 1998 with a survey to understand how gear deployment would affect marine mammals. By 2000, Maine's lobster industry was collaborating with the Maine Department of Marine Resources and National Marine Fisheries Service to help develop viable weak link options for vertical buoy lines and establish an appropriate breaking strength. Several options were subsequently adopted. A neutrally buoyant line was also developed to reduce the amount of floating line, and Maine lobstermen participated in testing this rope.

During this time, more than 200 Maine lobstermen participated in species identification and behavior training workshops to assist in whale sightings and disentangling whales; strategically located lobstermen along Maine's coast have disentanglement tools and have been successful in the rare occasions that whales have been entangled.

Over the next three years, 55 lobstermen tested more than 300 coils of neutrally buoyant rope. By 2003, vessels were participating in underwater video surveys to document

Maine's rocky habitats and the behavior of sinking, floating and experimental ropes actively fished. After Congress funded the establishment of the Consortium for Wildlife Bycatch Reduction, industry members have participated in regional and international meetings and tested a variety of new experimental ground lines and end lines. At the same time, lobstermen developed their own experimental ropes, and the Maine Lobstermen's Association coordinated follow-up underwater video. Additionally, 50 lobstermen tested two new experimental neutrally buoyant ropes manufactured by Hyliner.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, more experimental low profile ropes were tested by 75 lobstermen at the request of the Maine Department of Marine Resources. The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF) organized several efforts to achieve regional collaboration for rope testing and developed a standardized logbook, database and assisted in the development of survey protocols for rope testing. A number of coalitions began several intensive experiments with varying ropes.

Also in 2006 the MLA and the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF) requested funding from Congress to establish a voluntary poly ground line exchange program from Maine which was established in 2006 and funded at \$2 million. The program is expected to be implemented in winter 2007.

Throughout this entire period, rules and modifications have been constantly implemented and observed by lobstermen in all areas of the state. The MLA and partner organizations have over the past decade repeatedly called on the federal government and urged scientists to conduct more research to serve as a sound basis for any future whale protection planning.

In particular, the fishing industry has made clear that whale foraging studies would be necessary to fully understand if Right Whales are at risk in Maine waters. Whale sightings data show very few sightings in Maine waters over the past 30 years and scientists have not studied whale-feeding behavior in Maine to see if the food that whales eat is even available along our coast. All of this information is vital in making sound conservation decisions. Currently, very little to none of this scientific data exists.