North Atlantic Right Whale Advisory Committee Meeting

Tuesday, November 4th and Wednesday, November 5th, 2025 (8:30am-4:00pm AST)

Delta Beausejour, Moncton, NB (Hybrid via Zoom)

Meeting Summary

Key Discussion Points

- *Whalesafe Gear Pilots*: Continued advancement of on-demand gear and low-breaking strength gear testing and evaluation, and gear marking standards, with emphasis on fair access to gear, practical evaluation, and integration of pilot results into future management where appropriate. Concerns were raised about the role of the Technical Working Group in reviewing pilots to inform renewal. The Department committed to convening a NARW Technical Working Group meeting in 2026 to develop a whalesafe gear pilot feedback process that incorporates the views of all stakeholders.
- *Coordination and Communication:* Recognition of the need to strengthen inter-agency and industry communication, particularly through the Marine Mammal Response Program's communication plan, to ensure faster, more transparent information sharing. The Department committed to discussing and developing a robust communication plan centered on improving how information about marine mammal incidents are shared among government, response organizations, industry and the general public.
- *Seasonal Closure Protocol:* The membership discussed the seasonal closure protocol implementation timeline and would like to put forward a recommendation to the Minister to change the implementation date of the Seasonal Closure Protocol from the start of the snow crab fishery in CFA12 to June 1 for the 2026 season with a review of the outcome before officially adopting this change moving forward.
- *Commitment to Conservation:* Agreement that all measures — from closures to gear strategies — must be evaluated for both whale protection effectiveness and fishery practicality, with science and monitoring guiding continuous improvement.
- *North Atlantic Right Whale Recovery:* Strong reaffirmation of collaboration among Government of Canada departments, industry, NGOs, and response organizations to sustain Canada's leadership in right whale protection while supporting resilient, sustainable fisheries.

Day 1: Key Points

Government of Canada Surveillance Update

- Representatives from Ecosystem and Ocean Science (EOS), Transport Canada (TC), and Conservation & Protection (C&P) provided an overview of surveillance operations for the 2025 season.
- Highlighted the approach for detecting North Atlantic Right Whales (NARW), combining aerial surveys, acoustic monitoring, and vessel-based observations. Surveillance capacity remains central to triggering dynamic closures, validating detections, and ensuring compliance with NARW protection measures.
- Resource limitations placed pressure on monitoring assets which resulted in more hours flown for grid clearance compared to science systematic survey.
- Stakeholders raised concerns that as reliance on dynamic management increases, surveillance requirements will also grow—making consistent coverage essential. Issues were also identified with the reliability and performance of some acoustic Viking buoys, including delayed deployment and technical malfunctions that affected detection capabilities.

DFO Science Update

- Presented updates to the Whale Insight 2.0 tool highlighting new functionalities including: Viking buoy "heartbeat" histogram displays when the buoy is online alongside detection activity by date, and a new tool to instantly count detections in predefined polygons such as the restricted area and critical habitats.
- Briefly introduced the new "Fishing Prohibitions to Protect North Atlantic Right Whales" (or "FishPro") dashboard where ethe user can view daily dynamic fishing prohibitions of the current season.
- Provided quick overview of the Town Hall session that invited all the NARW AC distribution list that presented the latest findings from over a decade of research on NARW in Canadian waters, culminating in the Recovery Potential Assessment (RPA) and 11 research documents peer-reviewed through DFO's Canadian Science Advisory Secretariat (CSAS) process.

DFO Species at Risk Program Update

- The Species at Risk Program (SARP) provided an update on federal obligations and ongoing work under the Species at Risk Act (SARA). NARW remains listed as Endangered and continues to require a precautionary, risk-averse management approach due to the small population size and persistent threats from entanglement and vessel strikes.
- Provided an overview on NARW recovery documents and highlighted progress on their implementation.
- Provided an overview on the use of the RPA in informing an amendment of the species recovery strategy and the process the identification of additional critical habitat for the species during the development of a recovery strategy amendment, including when consultation and engagement will occur.
- Provided an overview on the Right Whale Recovery Network highlighting the focus of the annual meetings in 2024 and 2025.
- NGO community reiterated the importance of ensuring that all fisheries operate in a manner consistent with "no allowable harm" requirements under SARA, noting that any activities posing potential harm must undergo rigorous analysis and mitigation.
- Members raised questions about how SARA requirements intersect with emerging management approaches, such as dynamic closures and whalesafe gear pilots. DFO clarified that innovation is supported under SARA provided risks to whales are minimized and carefully monitored, and that ongoing evaluations of pilot projects will feed into future recovery planning.

Update on Whale Incidents and Response

- The Marine Animal Response Society (MARS) and the Campobello Whale Rescue Team (CWRT) provided an overview of 2025 right whale incidents, including confirmed sightings, entanglements, vessel strike cases, and response actions taken throughout Atlantic Canadian waters. For NARW, there were three incidents with live animals. One was a weir entrapped whale, Eg4146, and the other two were resightings of known entangled NARW Eg 5132; however, it couldn't be relocated. It was noted to have a poor body condition.
- Identified that response teams continue to face challenges related to limited capacity, weather conditions, and regional accessibility.
- Highlighted importance of rapid detection and coordinated response, noting that the effectiveness of rescue efforts depends heavily on timely communication between surveillance teams, Conservation & Protection, and response organizations. Case studies from the 2025 season illustrated both successful interventions and instances where response capacity was limited due to weather, distance, or whale behaviour.
- Discussed the ongoing need to strengthen and streamline the Marine Mammal Response Program (MMRP) communication protocol to ensure that incident information flows quickly to all necessary parties. Stakeholders reiterated that more transparent and timely public updates are essential to prevent misinformation and maintain confidence in the response system.
- Key challenges discussed included limited data on whales not visually or acoustically detected, variability in reporting sources, and the increasing pressure on responders due to expanding whale presence across

broader geographic areas. Despite these challenges, collaboration across government, NGOs, and industry was acknowledged as strong and improving each year.

DFO Conservation & Protection Update

- Conservation & Protection (C&P) conducts regular aerial and sea-based patrols to monitor and verify compliance with applicable regulations and management measures. C&P reported on compliance rates with dynamic and seasonal closure protocols, noting strong cooperation from harvesters and industry associations.
- C&P reported on compliance and enforcement hours for NARW.
- C&P reported on gear and vessel inspections, as well as marine animal incident response efforts.

MMPA Update

- Canada received positive comparability findings under MMPA; however, it is not time to take our foot off the gas.
- Focused on Canada's ongoing efforts to maintain compliance with U.S. import provisions, which require Canadian fisheries to meet standards comparable to U.S. marine mammal protection measures. DFO emphasized that Canada's current NARW management framework — including dynamic and seasonal closures, gear marking, low-breaking-strength rope, and on-demand gear pilots — continues to support Canada's equivalency position under the MMPA.
- Participants highlighted the uncertainty surrounding upcoming MMPA reviews and asked for clarity on contingency planning should the U.S. decline certification. DFO noted that while it does not control the U.S. certification process, it remains committed to demonstrating the effectiveness of Canadian measures and ensuring that all fisheries operate in alignment with MMPA expectations.
- Reaffirmed the importance of ongoing science-based risk reduction and consistent monitoring to document progress for U.S. regulators. DFO committed to continued engagement with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), transparent communication with industry, and integration of whalesafe gear innovation and closure performance data into future equivalency submissions.

DFO Fisheries Management Update

- Stakeholders reiterated the need for a balanced approach that safeguards whales while reducing uncertainty for fishers during the operational season.
- Stakeholders noted challenges with clarity around boundary updates, reopening processes, and timing of notifications.
- A significant portion of the discussion focused on shallow water pilots, which were tested to explore reopening opportunities in nearshore areas deemed lower risk for whale occurrence. Early findings suggested that these pilots can support fishing activity in certain areas while maintaining protective measures, though DFO emphasized the importance of continued monitoring and adaptive management to avoid unintended risk.
- Several members highlighted the need for more predictable communication and improved GPX files.
- The Department reaffirmed its commitment to adaptive management, stating that lessons learned from 2025 will inform the Technical Working Group's work ahead of the 2026 season. This includes refining closure protocols, improving data-sharing (via Whale Insight), and continuing collaboration with industry to reduce uncertainty while maintaining strong protection for NARW.

Seasonal Closure Protocol Discussion

- DFO proposed May 15 as the start date for seasonal closures, however several participants proposed shifting the start date of seasonal closures to June 1, suggesting that this timing would better reflect observed whale presence patterns in recent years.

- DFO made note of the recently published Important Habitat paper, highlighting emerging trends in habitat use in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and surrounding regions. The research summarizes all available sightings data, including behavioral observations, further demonstrating that NARW complete important life-cycle behaviors across a wide range of eastern Canadian waters, including in the spring. Reiterated ongoing uncertainties, including the likelihood of "unseen whales" in areas with limited surveillance coverage—an important factor when evaluating the effectiveness of dynamic versus seasonal closures. Furthermore, NARW are present in multiple areas at the same time in spring, which further challenges early season surveillance and detection.
- Harvesters expressed a preference for relying more heavily on dynamic closures, arguing they provide a more flexible, evidence-based approach to management.
- Others advocated for abolishing seasonal closures entirely, suggesting only the dynamic closures should be used.
- A Canadian Wildlife Federation analysis presented at the advisory committee meeting in 2024, indicated that the difference in protection outcomes between dynamic and seasonal closures would likely be minimal at the start of the season, reinforcing the potential benefits to harvesters who could get their quota caught early and remove gear before the whales begin to aggregate. CWF analysis was published in 2025, "Changes in fishing gear distribution and entanglement risk by increasing early season fishing effort in the Gulf of St. Lawrence snow crab fishery: Analysis of providing additional traps per harvester before the first NARW detection." Alexandra Cole, June 2025.
- Similar to what has been expressed previously, one harvester questioned the reliability of basing closures on detections from a single buoy, and suggested the need for triangulation or visual confirmation before enforcement.
- DFO emphasized that repeated temporary closures will increase demands on surveillance assets and enforcement resources which are already under significant pressure. Participants agreed that any move toward greater reliance on dynamic closures must be supported by expanded monitoring capacity and consistent data validation. However, DFO noted that surveillance resources for 2026 are unknown at this time but are unlikely to be increased.
- Highlighted the need for accurate and timely GPX data files for harvesters, as some reports indicated email and website links were unreliable.
- There was emphasis on the iterative nature of management — that measures should continue to evolve as understanding of whale distribution and co-occurrence with fisheries improves.
- The Department invited participants to review the supporting materials overnight and the discussion was reconvened the following day.
- Of note, participants discussed operational and technical challenges associated with acoustic Viking buoys, which play a role in triggering closure decisions. Delays in buoy deployment due to weather, maintenance issues, and communication malfunctions (e.g., with buoy IML-14) were discussed.

Day 2: Key Points

Transport Canada (TC)

- In 2025, TC's vessel traffic management measures were in effect from April 16 to November 15 in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the Bay of Fundy.
- TC's main NARW surveillance platforms included National Aerial Surveillance Program (NASP) aircraft and underwater acoustic gliders, which are critical for implementing and managing dynamic measures.
- Compliance with mandatory vessel measures remained above 99.5%, with no administrative penalties issued to date in 2025.
- The Cabot Strait voluntary slowdown was extended in fall 2025 by advancing the start date by three weeks to better align with NARW presence and dispersion patterns. Participation remained consistent in recent years at approximately 75%.
- Protection efforts in the Bay of Fundy were expanded to include the shipping lanes, where the Canadian Coast Guard used direct radio communication to request that vessel operators voluntarily reduce their speed to 10 knots when NARWs were detected.
- Communication of measures include navigation bulletins, industry meetings, and direct radio communication by the Canadian Coast Guard to ensured timely and actionable information for vessel operators.
- Participants inquired about communication coverage for smaller vessels and local operators, particularly in the Bay of Fundy region. TC confirmed that vessels over 20 meters are required to report to Coast Guard calling-in-points, ensuring they receive updated navigation information.
- Noted ongoing work with partners, including the Canadian Whale Institute (CWI), to expand outreach to the to domestic and international mariners, including multilingual educational materials..
- Questions were raised about potential impacts on coordination and communication protocols due to the transition of Coast Guard operations to the Department of National Defence (DND). TC assured members that right whale protection measures and interdepartmental collaboration will remain a priority and that no disruptions are expected to enforcement or communication practices, at this time.

Whalesafe Gear Strategy Update

- The Strategy is targeted for publication before the end of 2025. Questions were raised about timelines in the Strategy, recognizing that political changes and implementation delays mean some original dates will need updating. DFO confirmed that timelines will be adjusted but that the overall direction remains unchanged: continued pilots of WSG (including low breaking-strength and on-demand gear),working with industry on what works best in their fishery, and expansion of successful approaches.
- The Strategy was framed as a roadmap and toolbox, not a rigid rulebook: it is meant to support ongoing pilot projects, iterative testing, and gradual scaling of successful gear innovations beyond 2025. It is a fishery-by-fishery basis approach.
- DFO reviewed progress on on-demand gear, LBS gear, improved gear marking, and the shift toward sinking or neutrally buoyant groundlines, all aimed at reducing the number and severity of risk for vertical lines in the water. Participants stressed that evaluations must look at whether these measures work for whales and for harvesters— with clear indicators measuring line reduction, entanglement risk, safety, cost, and practicality in real fishing conditions.
- Stakeholders also raised concerns about market certification and how whalesafe measures intersect with certification processes.
- There was broad agreement that the Strategy must remain adaptive and evidence-based, that Section 52 authorization delays for pilots need attention, and that equitable access to whalesafe gear pilots (including smaller fleets) is essential for long-term success.

Whale Behaviour and Sinking Groundlines

- Dr. Lesage's presentation focused on whale diving and foraging patterns, illustrating how right whales spend substantial time near or along the seafloor when feeding on copepods,increasing the likelihood of interaction with bottom-set fishing gear particularly in the daytime. She emphasized the importance of considering whale behaviour, seasonality and dive profiles when designing mitigation strategies.
- Ed Trippel's presented on the relative buoyancy of various rope and groundline types, finding that positively buoyant groundlines can pose an entanglement risk to NARW.. He suggested that the use of sinking or neutrally buoyant groundlines can substantially reduce the probability of entanglement without major operational disruption to fishing activity.
- During discussion, participants acknowledged that removing vertical lines remains an effective way to reduce entanglement risk. They also noted that while sinking groundlines represent a major improvement over floating ones, their implementation requires continued monitoring to assess long-term durability, handling practicality, and any unintended consequences for fishing operations.

Ghost Gear Program Update

- DFO reported strong retrieval success rates through collaborative efforts involving industry, Indigenous organizations, and non-governmental partners. Funding from the Ghost Gear Fund supported both gear recovery operations and the development of innovative retrieval technologies, including improved grappling tools, biodegradable components, and gear tracking systems.
- Participants acknowledged the positive impact of the program on reducing marine debris and promoting safer fishing environments. Several stakeholders highlighted how the initiative also supports local employment, innovation, and stewardship within coastal communities.
- Discussion emphasized the need for better coordination of retrieval efforts with ongoing pilot projects and the importance of integrating ghost gear data into broader right whale risk assessments. Industry representatives suggested that retrieval success metrics and recovered gear data should be made publicly available to demonstrate progress and accountability.

Whalesafe Pilot Projects and On-demand Gear Pilot Zones

- Preliminary results indicated progress toward reducing vertical buoy lines and overall entanglement risk, though operational and logistical challenges remain. Fishers participating in pilot zones reported that some new gear systems performed reliably under calm conditions but required refinements for ease of deployment and retrieval in heavier seas.
- Stakeholders emphasized that evaluation criteria for pilots must measure both conservation effectiveness (e.g., reduction in line density and entanglement risk) and practicality for harvesters, including catch efficiency, safety, and cost. Participants agreed that an evidence-based evaluation framework is essential for determining which technologies are viable for broader adoption.
- The non-governmental organization community expressed their frustration with respect to the lack of a transparent and open process for Bay of Fundy pilot evaluations ahead of their renewal especially given the recent entanglement in a pilot area and their implementation in the Grand Manan Critical Habitat area that would otherwise be closed to fishing activity based on a single whale detection. The allowance of vertical lines in this area is viewed as a rollback in protections for right whales.
- The non-government organization community expressed their concern based on a perceived move toward mitigative whalesafe gear measures and move away from support for the implementation of preventative whalesafe gear modifications such as on-demand gear systems.
- The Department committed to convening a Technical Working Group meeting in the new year to work on the development of a process for the annual review of pilots.
- Several participants highlighted that allowing small-scale early-season pilots (e.g., 25 traps per vessel using on-demand gear before whale arrival) could help harvesters maximize early-season landings while reducing interaction risk. It was noted that this item would be discussed from an operational standpoint at

the Gulf of St Lawrence Snow Crab Advisory Committee meeting to ensure all impacted harvesters are present.

- Users of on-demand gear raised concerns about delays in authorization processes, particularly under Section 52 approvals, which can slow innovation and limit participation.
- There was also discussion about equitable access to pilot opportunities across regions and fleets. Some participants urged DFO to ensure that smaller, community-based fisheries receive the same level of technical and financial support as larger operators.
- Environmental organizations and industry representatives alike agreed that while on-demand systems and LBS ropes are not a complete solution, they represent meaningful progress toward long-term coexistence between the fishing industry and whale conservation objectives.
- The Department committed to organizing an on-demand sub working group under the NARW Technical Working Group.