

California Bill Aims to Expand ‘Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies’ Program Statewide

Assemblymember Gregg Hart’s Bill Would Build Off Existing Vessel-Speed-Reduction Program Introduced in Santa Barbara Channel in 2014

By Callie Fausey
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Encouraging ships to slow down could be key in helping protect vulnerable whale populations and reducing air pollution across California’s coastal waters. The demonstrated impact of such a solution has legislators seeking to create a statewide, voluntary vessel-speed-reduction and sustainable-shipping program for the California coast.

Assembly Bill 953 – introduced this month by assemblymembers Gregg Hart of Santa Barbara County and Damon Connolly of Marin County – would build off the existing Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies program that was introduced in the Santa Barbara Channel region.

The program works by incentivizing participating shipping companies to slow down in designated speed zones and currently only covers the Southern California and San Francisco Bay coastal regions.



Credit: John Calambokidis
Cascadia Research

“The Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies program has created incredible environmental benefits for air quality and whales since it launched in 2014,” said Aeron Arlin Genet, the executive director of the Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District. “AB 953 will ensure that the entire California coast will benefit from decreased air pollution, reduced greenhouse gasses that contribute to climate change, and a safer environment for whales.”

Since its implementation, the program has **resulted in** an estimated reduction of more than 76,000 tons of greenhouse-gas emissions and a 50 percent estimated decrease in whale strikes, as well as contributed to reduced levels of ocean noise. The bill would expand the program to additional areas of the California coast, including the San Diego and Monterey coasts and the North Coast.

Ship strikes pose a **major threat** to whales during prime migration season, especially in regions such as the Santa Barbara Channel that serve as a primary feeding ground and migratory route for humpbacks and other endangered whale species. Traveling at a speed of 10 knots or less has been found to decrease a vessel's risk of fatal collisions with whales significantly.



The voluntary speed limit encourages ships to safely travel through whale-abundant waters while also using less fuel and reducing air pollution. Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and other harmful pollutants generated by ships can benefit air quality in areas along California's coast, including Santa Barbara County, which have not met the

state air quality standards for ozone in recent years and experience high levels of vessel traffic.

AB 953 would task the Ocean Protection Council with creating the statewide program, in coordination with California air districts along the coast and in consultation with the federal Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Navy, the California Air Resources Board, and other stakeholders.

"The Santa Barbara voluntary vessel speed reduction program is a prime example of what happens when we prioritize public health, protect the marine ecosystem, and showcase the beneficial partnership between shipping companies, public health agencies, marine sanctuaries, and environmental organizations," said Assemblymember Hart. "It is clear that this program needs to be expanded throughout the state."

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