

Global shipping companies receive awards for reducing speeds off California coast to protect blue whales and blue skies

Eight companies merit top “Whale Tail” award for transiting at 10 knots or less in VSR zones off California

CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES, August 31, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Shipping companies received awards for reducing speeds in the 2022 “Protecting Blue Whales & Blue Skies” program. Twenty three companies participated, transiting at 10 knots or less in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Southern California region.

The voluntary incentive program ran May 1 - Dec. 15, 2022. Participation was greater than any previous year, and increased from eighteen shipping companies participating in 2021.



Shipping companies received Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies awards. Photo: Anastasia Kunz/NOAA

Shipping companies received recognition and financial awards based on the percent of distance traveled by their vessels through the Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) zones at 10 knots or less and with an average speed of 12 knots or less.

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Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies

The three award tiers are Sapphire (85-100% of fleet total distance in VSR zones traveled at ten knots or less), Gold (60-84%), and Blue Sky (35-59%). Automatic Identification System transponders on each ship transmit the ship’s speed and location. AIS data was analyzed for each fleet

and the company’s performance was classified by tier. Companies that performed at the Gold or Sapphire level were offered a financial incentive.

Eight participating companies reached the Sapphire level, the most in the top category since the program began. They include OOCL, MSC, Swire Shipping, Yang Ming, COSCO Shipping, NYK Ro-Ro, Wallenius Wilhelmsen, and CSL Group.

For the fifth year in a row, MSC notably achieved the Sapphire tier in the large fleet category, demonstrating that advance planning enables ships to adjust their schedule to cooperate without disrupting operations. OOCL, a new participant, notably achieved a 95% cooperation level in 2022, reducing speeds to 10 knots or less for over 15,000 miles in the California zones.

The ten-knot target complements the NOAA, U.S. Coast Guard, and EPA requests for all vessels (300 gross tons or larger) to reduce speeds during the months of peak air pollution and endangered blue, humpback, and fin whale abundance to protect these whales from ship strikes.



Two blue whales in Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary



Ocean air is essential to everyone. Photo: Bay Area Air Quality Management District

Ship strikes are a major threat to whales globally and to the recovery of endangered blue, fin, and humpback whales in California waters. Reducing the risk of ship strikes is a major priority of NOAA's, including NOAA's West Coast [national marine sanctuaries](#). From 2007-2022, observed and documented deaths off of California totaled 52 endangered whales. This is thought to represent only a small fraction of the total number of ship strikes taking place annually.

The timing of the program also coincides with the season when ground-level ozone (smog) concentrations are typically high. The 10-knot target allows ships to travel at an efficient operating load using less fuel and producing less pollution. Ocean-going vessels transiting the California coast generate nitrogen oxides (NO_x, a precursor to smog), sulfur oxides (SO_x), particle pollution, and greenhouse gasses (GHGs). These vessels account for nearly 200 tons of NO_x per day emitted off the coast of California, which affects ozone levels onshore in many regions of the state. The areas of greater Los Angeles (including Ventura County), Santa Barbara County, and

the San Francisco Bay do not meet the state and/or federal air quality standards for ozone.

The VSR incentive program has expanded in environmental benefits each year, including 2022, the seventh year. Of the 344,000 nautical miles of ocean transited by all the ships in the program, nearly 270,000 nautical miles were at 10 knots or less, which is equivalent to traversing the circumference of the Earth more than ten times.

Ships in the program transiting the southern California ~200-nautical-mile VSR zone traveled at 10 knots or less for 79% of the total miles traveled. Cooperation has steadily increased season after season. This shows increasing commitment by participating companies over the years.

In the ~100-nautical-mile San Francisco Bay Area VSR zone, which was expanded in 2022, cooperation levels from the participating companies rose to 72%, up from 60% in 2021.

Shipping companies that participated in the 2022 program reduced their air pollutant emissions by ~920 tons of NOx and 32,000 metric tons of regional GHGs. These numbers represent a 27% reduction in NOx and GHG pollution from the ships that participated in the program, as compared to baseline conditions. For comparison, the NOx reductions are equivalent to converting 580,000 passenger vehicles to zero emissions for a single year.

The transits of vessels participating in the VSR program posed ~44% less strike mortality risk to whales than if those vessels did not slow in cooperation with the program.

Ships in the Sapphire, Gold, and Blue Sky award tiers had sound levels that were 4.6 dB per transit lower when compared to 2021 baseline source levels. With a reduction in noise pollution, whales can likely communicate easier.

Fourteen companies – OOCL, MSC, COSCO Shipping Line, CSL Group, Ocean Network Express (ONE), Maersk, “K” Line, Wallenius Wilhelmsen, Wan Hai, Evergreen Shipping, Swire Shipping, Hapag Lloyd, GALI, and Yang Ming – generously declined all or part of their financial incentive payments. Those funds will be reinvested in the program.

The 2023 program runs May 1 through December 15, 2023. This will be the biggest season yet for whale protection and clean air, with tanker operators invited to join. The 2023 program does not feature financial incentives, due to participants' feedback in support of the vessel speed reduction effort and public recognition.

The program has also implemented a [Brand Ambassador](#) Initiative, for brands interested in reducing the impact of their global supply chain. Shippers receive data on the reduced speed efforts of their shipping companies and the resulting decrease in air pollutants, greenhouse gasses, ship strikes and ocean noise. This information can then be used to inform consumers purchasing their products and help these brands make more sustainable shipping choices.

The [Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies](#) program is a collaborative effort by air pollution control districts, California national marine sanctuaries, the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation, and other non-profit organizations.

For more information, visit www.bluewhalesblueskies.org.

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Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies

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