

## Seismic Airgun Blasting Could Be the Tipping Point for North Atlantic Right Whales

The proposed [expansion of offshore](#) drilling in the Atlantic Ocean poses unacceptable risks to the critically endangered North Atlantic right whale. [Seismic airgun blasting](#) in search of oil and gas is shortsighted and dangerous. Seismic airguns create one of the loudest manmade sounds in the ocean.<sup>1</sup> During seismic surveys, ships pull large arrays of airguns that release loud pressurized blasts of air through the ocean and into the seafloor. This harmful noise disrupts essential marine mammal activities such as feeding, reproducing and communicating. If allowed, seismic airgun blasting would put the North Atlantic right whale at risk of immediate harm and threaten its very existence. Seismic airgun blasting would hurt the chances for population recovery and undermine ongoing efforts to reduce the human causes of right whale mortality.

The North Atlantic right whale is one of the most endangered species on the planet. Only about 400 North Atlantic right whales remain.<sup>2</sup> The species faces a high risk of extinction due to fishing gear entanglements, ship strikes and underwater noise – all exacerbated by their small population size and low birth rate.<sup>3</sup> The most vulnerable whales – breeding females and their calves – cannot suffer any additional stress because their survival is crucial for the successful recovery of the entire species.<sup>4,5</sup>



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The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) authorized five companies to harass marine life while simultaneously conducting seismic airgun blasting [in the Atlantic](#). If geological and geophysical permits are also granted by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, seismic airgun blasting would impact the habitat of North Atlantic right whales and could pose an existential threat to the species.

Seismic airgun blasts can disturb, injure or even kill many different species – from the smallest zooplankton to the largest whales.<sup>5-10</sup> The noise from seismic surveys can be heard underwater nearly 2,500 miles from the source.<sup>1,11</sup> Hearing is the most important sense for many marine animals because it is necessary for mating, foraging, communicating, avoiding predators and navigating.<sup>12-14</sup>

The permits, currently being challenged in court, allow marine mammal harassment up to 850 combined days of around-the-clock activity and more than five million total seismic airgun blasts.<sup>15</sup> By the government's own estimates, these surveys could injure and disturb marine mammals hundreds of thousands of times, including critically endangered North Atlantic right whales.<sup>15</sup> These whales regularly migrate along the East Coast of the



United States and Canada, and can be found in the proposed seismic blast zone year-round.<sup>16,17</sup> The coastal waters off Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas are the only known calving grounds for this species.<sup>18</sup>

## **To save North Atlantic right whales from extinction, seismic airgun blasting cannot occur and deaths from fishing entanglements and ship strikes must stop.**

The North Atlantic right whale population has declined for the last seven years due to manmade stressors, including fishing gear entanglements, ship strikes and underwater noise.<sup>4</sup> Since June 2017, 20 North Atlantic right whale deaths have been documented.<sup>19</sup> When the cause of death was able to be determined, each proved to be human-caused. NOAA designated this wave of deaths as an “Unusual Mortality Event,” which denotes a significant die-off and demands an immediate response.<sup>19</sup>

Fewer than 100 breeding females remain today, and their survival is vital for reproduction.<sup>2</sup> There have been a handful of North Atlantic right whale births this winter, but no new calves were observed in the 2017/2018 season. The low number of births since 2010 cannot make up for the amount of documented mortalities.<sup>2,19</sup> The North Atlantic right whale population remains small, and with continued threats from human activity, their survival is uncertain.

## **Seismic surveys threaten the survival of the North Atlantic right whale.**

Loud background noise from seismic airgun blasting could prevent North Atlantic right whales from communicating with each other, which is essential for their reproduction and survival.<sup>20</sup> Seismic airgun noise can drown out the calls that keep mothers and calves together, increasing the likelihood that mother-calf pairs would be separated following blasting.<sup>20</sup> Without the protection of its mother, the calf could die. Noise also prevents whales from communicating with other adults, including potential mates.<sup>21,22</sup>

If seismic airgun blasting for oil and gas is not prevented in the Atlantic, it would produce harmful noise throughout important right whale habitat – interfering with communication<sup>20</sup> and increasing stress<sup>23</sup> on an already vulnerable species. Months of airgun blasting could cause chronic stress, leading to weakened immune systems or preventing females from having successful pregnancies.<sup>24,25</sup> Additional stress, combined with disrupted feeding and fewer new births, means seismic blasting could have species-level consequences.<sup>12,23</sup> Given their small population, the North Atlantic right whale cannot tolerate increased stress levels.

## **Oceana and its partners have sued the Trump administration to prevent seismic airgun blasting in the Atlantic Ocean. We will not stop in the fight to protect our coast from the expansion of dirty and dangerous offshore drilling and exploration.**

Visit [www.oceana.org/BlockTheBlast](http://www.oceana.org/BlockTheBlast) to get involved in the fight to protect North Atlantic right whales from the threat of seismic airgun blasting.

Sources available online at: [www.stophthedrill.org](http://www.stophthedrill.org).



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