



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 7, 2010

CONTACT INFO: Brian Segee, Environmental Defense Center, 805.963.1622 x113

Kristi Birney Rieman, Environmental Defense Center, 805.963.1622 x105

Andrea Treece, Center for Biological Diversity, 415.436.9682 x306

Jackie Dragon, Pacific Environment, 415-399-8850 x312

WHALE OF AN OPPORTUNITY

Conservation Groups Urge Coast Guard to Ensure Protection of Whales in New Study of Shipping Access Routes into LA/LB Ports

Santa Barbara, CA—In response to the Coast Guard’s announcement in today’s *Federal Register* that it is conducting a new Port Access Route Study to consider modifying existing shipping lanes through the Santa Barbara Channel into the Los Angeles and Long Beach Ports, conservation organizations urged the agency to ensure that any measures it ultimately enacts provide full protection to endangered whales, including blue, fin, humpback, and orca whales, from the threat of ship strikes. These protections are sorely lacking under the current port access system, as tragically illustrated in the fall of 2007, when at least five blue whales were struck and killed by ships within the Channel. This area hosts the densest known seasonal congregation of blues on the planet.

In addition to modifying or moving the existing shipping lanes, known as traffic separation schemes, the Coast Guard has the authority to institute vessel speed limits as part of the port access study process.

“The location of shipping lanes and the speeds at which ships travel are the two most obvious factors to consider in efforts to reduce the threat of ship strikes to large whales such as the blue and fin whale,” stated Brian Segee, Staff Attorney with Environmental Defense Center. “The Coast Guard has the clear authority to address both, and we are hopeful that the agency takes this important opportunity to craft access routes that are not only safe and efficient for the shipping industry, but that provide full protection to the region’s whale populations and other natural resources.”

Although not mentioned in the Coast Guard’s *Federal Register* notice, the current study process was catalyzed by shipping industry efforts to avoid compliance with a recent California Air Resources Board (CARB) rule requiring large ocean going vessels to burn clean, low-sulfur fuels within 24 nautical miles of the California coast, a zone that encompasses the entirety of the Santa Barbara Channel shipping lanes. Instead of complying with this rule—intended to reduce the rates of cancer in communities bordering the LA/LB Ports and throughout southern California—more than half of the ships are now traveling outside of the Channel Islands through what has been termed the “western approach.” This western approach runs through the heart of the Point Mugu Sea Range, where the Navy conducts hundreds of live fire and training exercises each year, causing an obvious and immediate national security and public safety issue.

“Slowing down ship traffic reduces air pollution, protects whales from ships strikes, and can even save money on fuel costs,” said Andrea Treece, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The Coast Guard has a terrific opportunity here to protect the health of coastal communities and the whales they love.”

The Coast Guard’s authority to designate traffic separation schemes is provided by the Ports and Waterways Safety Act (PWSA). Enacted in the wake of the 1967 grounding of the oil supertanker *Torrey Canyon* in the English Channel, the PWSA’s two primary goals are “navigation and vessel safety,” and “protection of the marine environment.” The PWSA mandates that the Coast Guard conduct an open and transparent public process in conducting its Port Access Route Study, and specifically directs the agency to consult with a broad range of stakeholders, including environmental groups.

“Currently, we have information about where whales are within the Santa Barbara Channel but we have less information about where whales are on the backside of the islands. We will be participating in the Port Access Study to ensure that all options under consideration- either inside or outside the Santa Barbara Channel- are examined in light of potential impacts commercial shipping can have on whales,” said Environmental Defense Centers Marine Conservation Analyst Kristi Birney Rieman.

The conservation organizations’ participation in the Port Access Route Study process is one part of their larger efforts to improve whale conservation. In the fall of last year, the organizations notified the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) of their intent to sue the agency for its failure to implement the Blue Whale Recovery Plan under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In particular, the groups noted the agency’s failure to identify and implement methods to reduce ship strikes.

"The Coast Guard should use the opportunity to bring state and federal agencies, conservation organizations, the shipping industry, and the military together to discuss critical issues about how to protect endangered whale populations," stated Jackie Dragon, Marine Sanctuaries Program Director for Pacific Environment.

(End).

The Environmental Defense Center protects and enhances the local environment through education, advocacy, and legal action and works primarily within Santa Barbara, Ventura and San Luis Obispo counties. Since 1977, EDC has empowered community based organizations to advance environmental protection.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 255,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Pacific Environment is a non-profit organization based in San Francisco that protects the living environment of the Pacific Rim by promoting grassroots activism, strengthening communities and reforming international policies. For nearly two decades, we have partnered with local communities around the Pacific Rim to protect and preserve the ecological treasures of this vital region. Visit www.pacificenvironment.org to learn more about our work.