



The Honourable Joanne Thompson, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans  
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The Honourable Steven MacKinnon, Minister of Transport  
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## **RE: North Atlantic Right Whale Protection Measures 2026**

December 18, 2025

Dear Ministers Thompson and MacKinnon,

The Ecology Action Centre is Atlantic Canada's oldest environmental organization, representing a broad membership and leading work on issues from biodiversity protection to climate change to environmental justice. We have been active stakeholders in North Atlantic Right Whale discussions since the 2017 mortality event and are writing to provide input on strong North Atlantic Right Whale (NARW) protection measures for 2026.

The latest population estimate for NARW, released in October 2025, indicates an estimated increase from 372 to 384 individuals across the population. This is an encouraging sign; the immense efforts by so many since the start of the 2017 mortality event appear to be having a positive impact. However, there is a long way to go to achieve recovery of this critically endangered species. **Now is the time to stay the course and maintain strong measures. Every single whale is important for recovery.**

We appreciate the continued efforts by both Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Transport Canada in lowering risk of vessel strike and entanglement in Canadian waters through increased monitoring, vessel speed requirements, dynamic and seasonal fishery closures and gear trials all while minimising impacts on industry where feasible. **We encourage both departments to commit to precautionous and evidence-based protections for 2026 and look forward continued strong collaborative efforts into the future.**

### **Strengthen ship speed restrictions**

Vessel speed management is an essential measure to prevent right whale deaths and support the species' recovery. We know that vessels travelling above 10 knots are extremely likely to kill a NARW on impact; maintaining speeds under 10 knots while right whales are present must be prioritised across the duration of the NARW season and distribution in Canadian waters.

We are particularly concerned with the approach taken by Transport Canada in the Cabot Strait. The Cabot Strait is a critical transit route for North Atlantic Right Whales. These whales rely on this passage throughout their time in Canadian waters, not just during a narrow spring or fall window. Continuing a voluntary measure in an area with such a high risk of lethal vessel strikes, where large commercial vessels make up more than 80% of traffic, and where compliance with voluntary measures has been poor lacks a clear rationale. Fishing-sector measures are mandatory and have resulted in substantial operational impacts, highlighting an imbalance in how protections are applied across industries. We strongly urge Transport Canada to implement a mandatory and season-long slow down in the Cabot Strait for 2026 and beyond.

### **Gear modifications and on-demand gear**

On-demand gear has emerged as a promising tool to reduce rope in the water and provide fishers with access to areas otherwise closed for whale protection. We recommend the department continue to invest in and support trials of on-demand gear across the region. We also recognise that on-demand gear use introduces challenges related to gear conflict and gear-location marking. We recommend that Fisheries and Oceans, with stakeholder consultation, develop specifications for on-demand gear systems to help ensure interoperability across manufacturers and enable consistent, reliable retrieval by Conservation and Protection Officers, as required.

The effectiveness of other gear modifications, in particular weak links, continues to lack clear evidence of risk reduction to NARWs. Their potential for risk reduction is based on limited research to date and is not sufficiently robust to support wide implementation in Canada. Weak links also pose a safety risk to fishers and could result in an increase in lost gear, or increased endline length to ensure safety.

We are extremely concerned with the decision to allow weak links in closed areas in 2026. The decision to allow the use of weak links in 2025 resulted in the entanglement of a whale in gear with a weak link. This incident suggests that weak links are not universally effective for risk reduction and should be implemented with caution. This decision was also made with no prior consultation with the advisory committee. Collaboration has been a central part of the NARW community, the advisory committee and NARW recovery efforts. This is an aspect we see as a strength in the Federal Government's approach to date and critical to this issue. We hope to see this spirit of collaboration continued in future decisions and note that this decision is one which puts NARWs at unnecessary risk.

### **Maintain strong fisheries management measures**

We support the continued use of seasonal and dynamic closures of fishing areas where NARWs are detected. As discussed at the NARW Advisory Committee in November 2025, we are in support of the proposed amendment of the start date of seasonal closures to June 1<sup>st</sup>, to reduce the burden on fishers, while keeping the risk of whale encounters low.

We continue to support the opening the fishing season for fisheries impacted by closures as early as possible. This will allow fleets to catch much of their quota before the arrival of the right whales. This not only allows quota access, limiting economic impacts to fisheries, but also reduces the risk to right whales by decreasing the likelihood of co-occurrence.

### **Future-proof management measures**

While current management measures have produced encouraging results, climate and ocean conditions continue to evolve. We cannot assume that existing approaches will remain appropriate as environmental conditions and whale distributions shift. Given the decades-long horizon for species recovery, it is essential to develop adaptive, ecosystem-based management systems that advance North Atlantic Right Whale recovery while supporting the long-term viability of coastal communities.

We urge the Government of Canada to announce the 2026 North Atlantic Right Whale measures in a timely manner, ensuring affected fisheries have a sufficient lead-time for season openings and that the measures include strong, coordinated actions from both Fisheries and Oceans Canada and Transport Canada. We remain committed to supporting efforts that reduce the risk of vessel strikes and entanglement for North Atlantic Right Whales and other cetacean species at risk in Canadian waters.

Sincerely,  
Holly Isnor



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CC:

Adam Burns, Assistant Deputy Minister, Assistant Deputy Minister Fisheries and Harbour Management, Department of Fisheries and Oceans

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