

## BEACH BLOG



# Speed limits proposed for large boats after blue whale deaths

A petition was submitted Tuesday by the Center for Biological Diversity asking the federal government to impose speed limits of large boats in the Santa Barbara Channel because of recent whale deaths along the coast.

Necropsies of two whales found dead off the Southern California coast – one near Ventura and the other near the Santa Barbara Channel - showed the mammals had broken bones. A dead whale that washed up in Long Beach on Sept. 8 – but was towed out to shore before examination – is also suspected of being hit by a large vessel, said Brendan Cummings, ocean program director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

“The only thing that can break a blue whale is something bigger than a blue whale, such as a container ship. Two in one week, that’s unusual,” said Cummings.

The petition asks that boats – commercial or personal - larger than 65 feet have a limit of 10 miles per hour in the Santa Barbara Channel, which spans about 80 miles. To see a copy of the proposal and a map of the area, [click here](#).

While the emergency petition only asks that the limit be enacted in Santa Barbara, Cummings said eventually they will ask it to be expanded all along the California coastline – including Orange County.

Close to the Orange County coast, the number of blue whales has increased in recent years. While it was once rare to see a dozen of the world’s largest mammals off the coast, last year there were more than 400 sightings off local waters.

“It makes common sense ... to slow down shipping everywhere along our coast,” Cummings said. “We’ve asked on an emergency basis for it to be placed in Santa Barbara

Channel – but as a longer term solution, yes, our whole coastal area should be a sanctuary for blue whales.”

Norris Tapp, manager of Davey’s Locker Sportsfishing, said that the impact would not be large to their fishing operation, since they generally do not exceed about 11.5 miles per hour. Davey’s Locker runs fishing charters on boats about 80 feet in length.



“That’s the exact reason – avoiding hitting not just whales, anything else like logs or large kelp,” he said. “You’ve got to be the most unlucky person in the world to hit a blue whale.”

In the Channel Islands near Santa Barbara, there’s also a suspected outbreak of Domoic Acid – a poisonous type of algae bloom which may have caused a rash of sea lion deaths in Orange County last year. The outbreak up north

may be slowing down the whales.

“These ships are so big, they don’t even notice they have a whale on its bow,” Cummings said. “Whatever the cause (of death) is, we know the ships are hitting them. The one thing we can regulate is the ship speed.”

There are currently laws protecting the blue whale, which was on the verge of extinction prior to commercial whaling being outlawed in the mid-60s. In 1973, the Endangered Species Act allowed the whales to be protected by U.S. law.

“In the past decade, there have been hopeful signs of a comeback,” Cummings said. “Our coast should be a sanctuary for these animals. Unless we control ship speeds, our waters are really a death trap.”

- Laylan Connelly