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Coast Guard study proposes moving Calif. shipping lanes away from whale zone

Commercial shipping routes into the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach soon may be adjusted.

Changes in air quality regulations along with whale feeding grounds in the Santa Barbara Channel prompted the U.S. Coast Guard to propose changes in shipping lanes for the Southern California ports.

In November 2011, the Coast Guard finished a Port Access Route study that recommended altering the current Traffic Separation Scheme to shift vessels away from the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary. The plan urged the creation of a second Traffic Separation Scheme that would make official a voluntary route running south of the Channel Islands that vessels have been using since 2009.

“The goal of the study was to help reduce the risk of marine casualties and increase the efficiency of vessel traffic in the study area,” the Coast Guard said in a study summary. “When vessels follow predictable and charted routing measures, congestion may be reduced, and mariners may be better able to predict where vessel interactions may occur and act accordingly.”

The shipping industry has backed the moves to reduce the chance of injuries to marine life in the congested area. Endangered marine species such as blue, fin and humpback whales feed on krill in the rich waters of the Santa Barbara Channel.

“The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration came up with some pretty good science that shows blue whales in particular tend to congregate north of Santa Cruz Island at the 200 meter isobar in the shipping channel,” said T. L. Garrett, vice president of the Pacific Merchant Shipping Association.

In 2009, the California Air Resources Board (CARB) imposed a 24-nm limit in which vessels must use low-sulfur distillate fuels while transiting the coastwise Santa Barbara Channel. On Dec. 1, 2011, the board extended that limit to the Channel Islands themselves, which made the new



*The U.S. Coast Guard proposes modifying shipping lanes into the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. The intention is to prevent whale strikes and improve traffic safety. The alternative southern route was already in use by ship operators because of low-sulfur fuel rules closer to the coast. (Virginia Howe illustration/Source: U.S. Coast Guard)*

southern route around the islands a less useful alternative.

After the 2009 limits were imposed, vessel operators started using an east-west route south of the Channel Islands so ships would spend less time in the low-sulfur fuel zone. In the Coast Guard's analysis, "we found unbounded vessel traffic transiting the waters south of the Channel Islands to be a safety concern. With increased vessel traffic, the risk of collision needed to be addressed," the summary said.

"When the CARB regulations went into effect, roughly 50 percent of the fleet accessing L.A.-Long Beach started going south of the Channel Islands," Garrett said. "The Coast Guard simply recognized that phenomena and decided that it was worthwhile to establish safe shipping lanes south of the Channel Islands."

The two major recommendations from the study call for narrowing the Traffic Separation Scheme in the Santa Barbara Channel from two miles to one mile and shifting the southern lane one mile to the north, and establishing an official Traffic Separation Scheme for the currently voluntary route south of the Channel Islands. However, the route also brings vessels close to the U.S. Navy's missile test range.

The Coast Guard's Los Angeles-Long Beach Sector conducted the study and sent it to Coast Guard headquarters for review. Depending on the response from headquarters, the next step would be a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, during which the industry and the public would be able to comment on the proposed changes, according to Lt. Cmdr. Frances Fazio, chief of the sector's waterways management division. Fazio said the rulemaking process typically takes about two years.

Richard McKenna, executive director of the Maritime Exchange of Southern California, expects the recommendation for the narrower Traffic Separation Scheme in the Santa Barbara Channel to survive the review process because of its impact on marine life. "The one continuing issue is sensitivity to whales and whale strikes," McKenna said. Also, the Navy will likely propose changes to shift vessels away from its area of operations, McKenna added.

However, the new traffic lane may be less of an issue because of the new air-quality restrictions around the Channel Islands.

"We've seen an increase in vessel traffic going back to the traditional Santa Barbara traffic separation scheme, but there are still other vessels using the volunteer scheme," Fazio said.

*Gary L. Wollenhaupt*