

Rep. Huffman Opening Statement

942 words, ~5 min

Good morning. Thank you for joining us today for an important hearing examining the many threats facing one of the most endangered marine mammals: the North American right whale.

There are less than 420 right whales remaining – that’s fewer right whales in existence than members of Congress. If more is not done to save this iconic species, scientists predict that they could go extinct in the next few decades.

According to NOAA Fisheries, in order to maintain a sustainable right whale population, no more than one right whale per year can be killed by human causes. And as Dr. Kraus has pointed out in his written testimony, that number has been exceeded every single year for the last 20 years. No wonder these whales are in such a dire situation.

2017 was a particularly bad year for them: there were 17 deaths and no new calves. While we have seen positive news recently, including seven right whale calves spotted this year, there are still ongoing threats, including fishing gear entanglement and accidental ship strikes. Additionally, science shows that climate

change may be shifting their food source northward. This means right whales will be moving further into areas with shipping lanes and lobster traps.

So today we will talk about several promising solutions we can act on now, including ropeless technology for lobster traps, vessel speed reductions, zooplankton (“zo – plankton”) monitoring, coordination with Canada, and more. In addition to technology innovation and coordinated management, it’s critical to move legislation, like the bipartisan SAVE Right Whales Act, introduced by my colleague Congressman Moulton from Massachusetts last Congress. This bill would provide financial resources for research to develop and test technologies to reduce entanglements and vessel collisions to help the survival of the right whale.

However, in addition to entanglements and ship strikes, a new issue further endangers the North Atlantic right whale. In yet another handout to the oil and gas industry, the Trump administration is now actively threatening the long-term survival of the North Atlantic right whale by opening the Atlantic coast to seismic air gun blasting and oil and gas exploration activities.

And as we've consistently seen with other decisions from the Trump administration, this completely undermines our foundational environmental laws, like the Marine Mammal Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Seismic air guns are harmful to many forms of marine life ranging from plankton, the base of the ocean food web, to fish and whales. For right whales and other marine mammals, sound is critical for communication, feeding, and navigation.

But just last year, NOAA Fisheries issued Incidental Harassment Authorizations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act to allow five companies to use seismic air gun blasting to survey the Atlantic Continental Shelf for oil and gas. These air gun blasts occur as often as every ten seconds for months at a time, creating a noise that is louder than all but military-grade explosives. Thanks to NOAA issuing these authorizations, seismic companies plan to fire air guns a combined five million times over the course of their testing. I have my air horn here with me today, if anyone wants to know what it's like to be subjected to that kind of noise.

I also want to point out several major problems with these authorizations, considering the near-extinct status of the North Atlantic right whale:

First, even though five different companies requested permits to conduct surveys within similar timeframes and in similar locations, NOAA Fisheries did not consider the effects of the five seismic surveys when combined with each other or with other activities that cause ocean noise. Instead, the agency analyzed the impacts of each survey in isolation, ignoring the fact that the ocean is already a very loud place and set to become five million blasts louder under these authorizations.

Second, NOAA Fisheries' proposed mitigation is to prohibit seismic blasting within 90 kilometers of the coast between November and April. But we know that right whales, including mothers and calves – the most vulnerable of the species – are present in this area nearly year-round – not just between November and April. We also know that sound travels great distances underwater, and a small buffer is unlikely to shield these whales completely from the negative impacts of seismic testing.

Third, under the Obama administration, BOEM rejected the seismic permit applications for seismic testing in the Atlantic because of the impacts on marine life, including the right whale. They stated that the “value of obtaining the geophysical information from the new seismic airgun surveys in the Atlantic does not outweigh the potential risks of those surveys’ acoustic pulse impacts on marine life.” I haven’t seen any new scientific information showing that the potential risks have changed.

Finally, this activity could start imminently – the companies can begin air gun blasts within 30 days of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) issuing the permits for exploration. But seismic blasts could make the difference between recovery and extinction for right whales.

Given the many threats facing this species and the efforts underway to save each and every whale, it makes no sense that NOAA Fisheries would allow seismic blasting to occur.

There are some truly useful technologies and policies that we should expand and implement to protect right whales, and I look forward to hearing more about what can be done. But it’s also

critical that we don't add any new threats just to make the oil industry a few bucks.

With that, I look forward to hearing from NOAA and our panel of scientific experts today. I now invite the Ranking Member for his remarks.