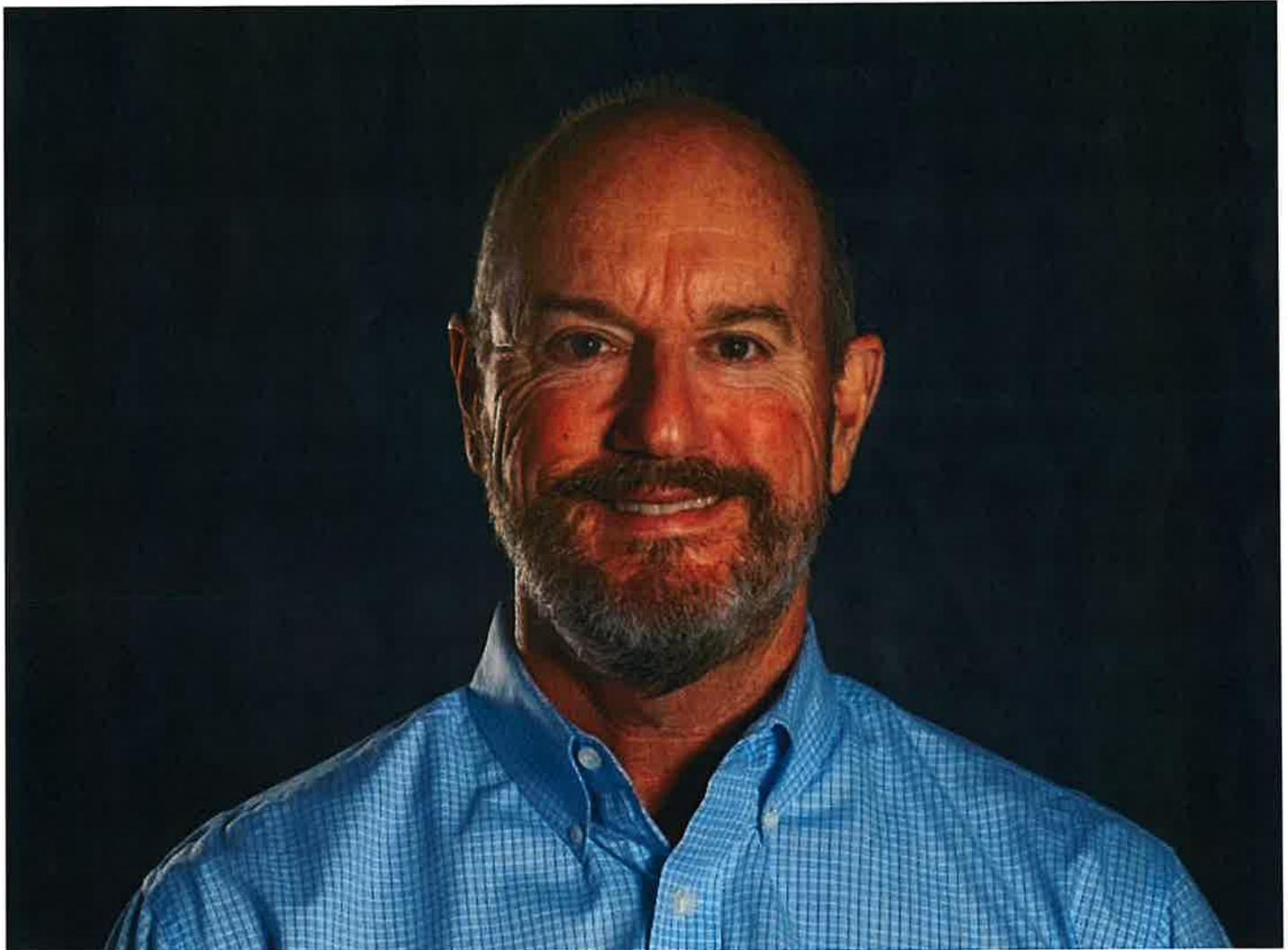


https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/commentary/noaa-vessel-speed-rules-whales-sc-coastal-economy/article_9129f58c-233b-11ef-8361-2f22c232917e.html

Commentary: NOAA's proposed vessel-speed rule would devastate SC's coastal economy

BY TOMMY HANCOCK

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In my 54 years of boating and fishing along South Carolina's coast, I've not yet had the privilege of seeing a North Atlantic right whale. Since I was 8, I've spent more than 500 days fishing these waters, yet this elusive creature remains a rarity to be seen.

Now, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has proposed expanding a rule that would cripple our coastal economy in the name of protecting these endangered whales. As someone who loves the sea, I support protecting our endangered marine mammals, but not in a way that puts boaters in danger and destroys livelihoods across our state.

South Carolina's coastal recreation economy is a powerhouse. A study by University of South Carolina economist Joey Von Nessen says boating and fishing in our state have a \$6.5 billion economic impact, supporting 29,000 jobs annually, with \$1.6 billion in labor income that would not exist without it. Our coastal communities thrive on recreational boating and fishing, but NOAA's reckless proposal threatens to dismantle this vital sector.

NOAA's proposed rule to limit all boats 35 feet and over to a speed of 10 knots — equivalent to a mere 11 mph — is illogical and dangerous. This antiquated measure grossly ignores the realities of boating safety and practical navigation. Imposing a 10-knot speed limit in open seas is not just impractical; it endangers the lives of boaters.

Small recreational boats are not designed to cut through the choppy waters of the Atlantic at such low speeds, which increase the likelihood of capsizing or swamping. Further, limiting boats to 10 knots restricts their visibility and ability to maneuver effectively, particularly in deteriorating weather conditions. Speed is a vital safety asset during sudden weather changes, and boaters need the capability to return to port quickly when storms approach. The proposed speed restriction would hinder this ability, potentially trapping boaters in dangerous situations.

Not only does the rule impose significant safety concerns, but it also reeks of enforcement issues and blatant government overreach. Just last year, a Charleston-based boat over 65 feet was hit with a \$15,000 fine from NOAA based on Automatic Identification System data from two years prior. The penalty for speeding in a whale zone surpasses that for

speeding in a school zone and can be issued through the mail nearly two years later. To put this in perspective, this would be as if you were driving your vehicle down Interstate 26 and the government sent you a ticket for speeding based on your GPS data two years later.

The facts simply do not support NOAA's heavy-handed approach. In more than 50 years, there has been just one serious whale strike off South Carolina's coast, and never by a vessel between 35 and 65 feet. This rule is not only baseless but also misguided in its failure to distinguish between small boats and enormous oceangoing vessels. Most fatal whale strikes come from vessels over 260 feet, not recreational boats. NOAA's blanket rule ignores these critical differences, endangering South Carolina's boaters while failing to make a meaningful impact on whale conservation

The fallout from this misguided rule would be catastrophic. It threatens not only recreational boating and fishing but also jobs and entire business sectors dependent on our Atlantic access, from fisheries to coastal tourism and aquaculture. South Carolina's economy cannot afford this ill-conceived intervention. My company, Sportsman Boats, employs more than 450 people, a small fraction of the jobs statewide that could be affected.

As a dedicated boating and fishing enthusiast, I understand the irreplaceable value of our time, safety and commitment to conservation on the water. This dedication led our industry to establish the South Carolina Boating and Fishing Alliance nearly four years ago, aiming to protect and enhance these experiences for future generations while leading industry-driven conservation initiatives.

NOAA's one-size-fits-all rule not backed by science is a blunt instrument that will do more harm than good, disregarding effective, technology-driven solutions.

Protecting wildlife and the Atlantic Ocean's ecosystem will always be a priority. But NOAA's proposed rule isn't the right approach. The industry urges NOAA to rethink this rule by working with the recreational boating and fishing industries to use the best technology available to protect the North Atlantic right whale. The next 54 years of South Carolina's coastal communities and economies depend on it.

Tommy Hancock is the owner and founder of Sportsman Boats.