



**Informational Item**

March 23, 2026

Item 9

**Information Item:  
Blue Whales Blue Skies Program**

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**Location:** Statewide

**Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives:** Goal 4: Enable a Sustainable Blue Economy that Protects Ocean Health; Objective 4.3: Reduce impacts from other industrial uses of the ocean

**Exhibits:**

Exhibit A: [2026 Voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction Announcement](#)

Exhibit B: [News Release: California Protects Blue Whales and Blue Skies with Historic State Law](#)

**Executive Summary:**

The Protecting Blue Whales Blue Skies (BWBS) program is a partnership between government agencies, research partners, and environmental NGOs working to make California’s skies cleaner, the ocean quieter, and California’s coast safer for whales. Oceangoing vessels 300 gross registered tons or larger are asked to travel at 10 knots or less in Vessel Speed Reduction (“VSR”) zones offshore California. BWBS monitors vessel speeds and recognizes top performing shipping companies that cooperate with positive press and an award ceremony. Assembly Bill 14 (Hart, 2025; AB 14), enacted in January 2026, authorizes the expansion of the current program statewide and requires the Ocean Protection Council (OPC) to participate in the BWBS program to identify state priorities and elevate the programs reach across the state. This informational report provides an overview of the Blue Whales Blue Skies program background, purpose and goals, priorities with collaborating with the State of California through OPC, and next steps to reduce whale strikes and air pollution across California’s coast.

## Background

### Overview

In 2014, the Blue Whales Blue Skies Program was launched by a coalition of partners that now includes the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation, NOAA’s Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, California county air district agencies, Benioff Ocean Science Laboratory, and now OPC as an advisor. The original voluntary program started in Southern California in 2014 along the Santa Barbara Channel, expanded to cover all five National Marine Sanctuaries, and in 2026 the entire coastline in California.

BWBS aims to improve air quality and reduce the risk of fatal ship strikes and underwater noise impacts on endangered whales off California’s coast. The program achieves these goals through a voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) zone, in which vessels of 300 GT (gross tons) and larger are requested to travel at 10 knots or less. To motivate shipping line cooperation, BWBS offers verification of performance and public recognition to shipping lines with highest compliance. Enrollment and engagement from industry have grown significantly with cooperation rates reaching 85% across enrolled shipping lines and 76 shipping companies participating between 2018 and 2025. The 2025 VSR season was from May 1 –December 31 and follows the boundaries of the National Marine Sanctuaries, with some additional VSR zoning around the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary to protect migrating whales in these sensitive habitats. Since 2014, the program has avoided over 200,000 metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions, 5,900 tons of NOx emissions, and resulted in an estimated 50% reduction in whale strikes.

### Purpose and Goals: Why Reduce Vessel Speeds?

**Whale Ship Strikes.** Global shipping traffic overlaps with about 92% of whale habitat ranges as massive cargo ships intersect feeding and migration areas, increasing the likelihood of fatal ship strikes – one of the leading threats to endangered whales. Research shows that ships traveling at 10 knots or less significantly reduce the risk of fatal ship strikes. In 2024, BWBS enrolled shipping lines reduced the risk of ship strikes by an estimated 50%.

**Ocean Noise.** Additionally, commercial shipping is a significant contributor to anthropogenic ocean noise pollution that directly affects marine life. The low-frequency noise produced by large vessels can mask communication signals that marine species, like whales and dolphins, rely on for essential life functions such as communication, navigation, and foraging. VSR programs in regions with high whale presence are a crucial step in mitigating the harmful effects of chronic noise pollution, with participating vessels reducing their underwater radiated noise pressure by approximately 38%.

**Air Quality.** Large ocean-going vessels that travel California’s coastline and into its ports contribute more than 50% of the emissions in many coastal communities. Slowing ship speeds to 10 knots decreases air pollution and emissions by about 27%, improving public health and helping air districts achieve federal and state health-based air quality standards. The annual NOx reductions resulting from VSR zones equate to taking 900,000 cars off the road for a year, and between 2014 and 2024, the program avoided an amount of NOx emissions equivalent to removing 4.7 million vehicles from the road for one year. In California, peak ozone season, defined as warmer months in which ground-level ozone (a harmful pollutant) concentrations are highest, coincides with peak migratory seasons for endangered whales, creating opportunity to simultaneously protect marine wildlife and air quality for people living in coastal communities.

### **Assembly Bill 14: Statewide Expansion of the Program and OPC’s Role in BWBS**

Codified October 24, 2025 and enacted January 2026, Assembly Bill 14 (Hart, 2024; AB 14), “Coastal resources: Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program” authorizes statewide expansion of the BWBS VSR program. The bill establishes OPC as a stakeholder and an advisor to BWBS to inform and support coastal air districts in expanding the program statewide. OPC has recently begun engaging with the coalition, participating in monthly planning and stakeholder outreach meetings, including briefings with the U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, EPA, and maritime sector, as called for in AB 14 (Hart, 2025). OPC will continue to engage with the coalition to help identify and balance state priorities and elevate the program’s reach across the state.

Participation in BWBS advances OPC’s [2026-2030 Strategic Plan](#) Goal 4: Enable a sustainable blue economy that protects ocean health, under which OPC has committed to sustainable economic practices that minimize the impact on marine ecosystems and taking steps to mitigate impacts of industrial uses of the ocean. To achieve this goal, OPC supports the implementation of priority actions to reduce whale vulnerability to ship strikes, including the expansion of the BWBS VSR program consistent with AB 14 (Hart, 2025), through 2030.

### **Next Steps**

#### **Statewide Expansion: 2026 VSR Zone and Season**

**Geographic Scope:** OPC will continue to collaborate with the BWBS coalition to elevate this important program and increase program impact. This includes helping identify the most effective VSR zone boundaries and seasonal timing for implementation. For the 2026 season, the BWBS coalition is recommending an expansion of the existing VSR zone to extend statewide and further offshore to incorporate unprotected areas with concentrated whale habitat related to

reproduction, feeding, and migration, known as Biologically Important Areas (BIAs). While the 2025 VSR zones incorporate known hot spots for whales along the central and southern coast, data show that additional high ship strike risk areas exist beyond the current VSR zone in BIAs that are not captured by the 2025 zone. Analyses suggest that some shipping companies choose to avoid traveling through the VSR zone, instead traveling around it at speeds >10 knots, therefore displacing some impacts from inside the VSR zone to outside the zone.

Based on solicited input from the shipping industry and maritime sector on expansion of the VSR zone and season, most industry respondents shared that a continuous zone with straight boundary edges would make voluntary compliance easier as ships navigate California's coast. The 2025 VSR zone was composed of multiple disjointed zones, which complicate voyage planning for shipping lines to participate in the voluntary program. Some industry organizations expressed concern that an expanded VSR zone will require adjustments to operations and voyage planning and their cooperation rates may drop off. The BWBS program has adjusted program parameters, namely expanded award tiers, in recognition of these concerns and to position the program for long term success.

Expanding VSR statewide would increase crucial protection for vulnerable whales outside the existing VSR zone, reduce air pollution from ships traveling farther offshore, and reduce ocean noise while providing statewide consistency that supports proactive planning by industry and further incentivizes voluntary participation.

**Seasonal scope:** Seasonal voluntary VSR requests by NOAA have historically commenced May 1 each year to coincide with known historical patterns of seasonal arrival of whales. In recent years, northward whale migration and arrival time to California feeding grounds are occurring earlier, in April. Based on these data, a start date prior to May 1 and a December 31 end date to the voluntary VSR would accommodate shifting whale migration patterns and strengthen protections. This expansion would also capture more warmer months that experience higher levels of pollution, improving air quality for coastal communities. Many industry respondents expressed support for VSR requests beginning prior to May 1 or a continuous, year-round VSR zone.