



Puget Sound Cetacean Desk Pilot Program (2023)

Report to Congress
July 8, 2024



U.S. Coast Guard

Foreword

July 8, 2024

I am pleased to present the following report, “Puget Sound Cetacean Desk Pilot Program (2023),” prepared by the U.S. Coast Guard.

The Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022 directs the establishment of a Puget Sound Cetacean Desk pilot program along with the submission of a biennial report that evaluates the functionality, utility, reliability, responsiveness, and operational status of the Cetacean Desk.

Pursuant to Congressional requirements, this report is provided to the following members of Congress:



The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chair, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Ted Cruz
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

The Honorable Sam Graves
Chairman, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

The Honorable Rick Larsen
Ranking Member, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Should you require any additional assistance, please do not hesitate to contact my Senate Liaison Office at (202) 224-2913 or House Liaison Office at (202) 225-4775.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "L. L. Fagan".

Linda L. Fagan
Admiral, U.S. Coast Guard
Commandant



Puget Sound Cetacean Desk Pilot Program (2023)

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I. Legislative Language

This report responds to the language set forth in Section 11304(g) of the Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022 (Pub. L. No. 117-263), which reads:

SEC. 11304. PILOT PROGRAM TO ESTABLISH A CETACEAN DESK FOR PUGET SOUND REGION.

(g) **REPORT REQUIRED.**—Not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of this Act, and every 2 years thereafter for the duration of the pilot program, the Commandant, in coordination with the Under Secretary and the Administrator of the Maritime Administration, shall submit to the appropriate congressional committees a report that—

- (1) evaluates the functionality, utility, reliability, responsiveness, and operational status of the Cetacean Desk established under this section, including a quantification of reductions in vessel strikes to large cetaceans as a result of the pilot program;
 - (2) assesses the efficacy of communication between the Cetacean Desk and the maritime industry and provides recommendations for improvements;
 - (3) evaluates the integration and interoperability of existing data collection methods, as well as public data, into the Cetacean Desk operations;
 - (4) assesses the efficacy of collaboration and stakeholder engagement with Tribal governments, the State of Washington, institutions of higher education, the maritime industry, ports in the Puget Sound region, and nongovernmental organizations;
- and
- (5) evaluates the progress, performance, and implementation of guidance and training procedures for Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service personnel, as required under subsection (f).

II. Report

The rich waters of Puget Sound and the Salish Sea are home to numerous marine mammal species and marine traffic that bolsters the area's vibrant maritime economy and national defense. Vessel activity in and near busy shipping lanes poses risks to large cetacean (whales) species. The Coast Guard Cetacean Desk was established in December 2023 to reduce the threat of vessel impacts on large cetaceans in the Puget Sound region. The Cetacean Desk, hosted in the Coast Guard Sector Puget Sound Vessel Traffic Service (VTS), was launched to facilitate timely notifications to commercial vessel operators in areas where large cetaceans are sighted. These notifications are intended to enhance mariners' situational awareness and ability to act.

Cetacean Desk Pilot Program

Status

The Cetacean Desk pilot program began operations in the Puget Sound VTS in December 2023. The Coast Guard adopted an iterative approach consisting of analysis, evaluation, and stakeholder feedback to support and assess Cetacean Desk operations throughout the pilot program's duration. The Coast Guard will continue to work with a myriad of government and local stakeholders committed to cetacean conservation to explore additional ways to more effectively meet the requirements outlined in Section 11304(a) of the *Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022*. The Coast Guard is in the process of developing performance metrics to measure program effectiveness in protecting large cetaceans, in conjunction with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and will include such measures in future reports.

Operation

The Coast Guard determined that utilizing the WhaleReport Alert System (WRAS) for notifications to VTS users best met Cetacean Desk mission requirements, while aligning with Canadian precedent for procedural uniformity throughout the Salish Sea. WRAS is a whale reporting and operator notification program run by a non-profit organization, Ocean Wise. However, cetacean sightings may also be reported directly to the Cetacean Desk by phone or VHF radio. In accordance with Section 11304(f)(1) of the *Don Young Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2022*, the Captain of the Port Puget Sound has recommended establishment of a Local Variance, which outlines the region's cetacean reporting regime for the duration of the pilot program.

Personnel and Training

The Coast Guard assigned an officer to lead program development and implementation of the pilot program. The Cetacean Desk is staffed to the extent practicable with existing VTS watchstanders, whose principal responsibility is navigational safety. In collaboration with NOAA, the Coast Guard worked with the Port of Vancouver's Enhancing Cetacean Habitat and Observation (ECHO) Program to update their "Whales in our Waters" online tutorial content, which provides Puget Sound VTS watchstanders with knowledge to support vessel operators in recognizing large cetaceans.

Analysis of Near Real-Time Reporting Databases

An effective vessel notification system requires a robust, comprehensive database of near real-time reported large cetacean sightings. The Coast Guard evaluated currently available sightings networks in the region, including those run by WRAS, Whale Alert, Orca Network, The Whale

Museum, and the Pacific Whale Watch Association. Sightings networks are generally operated independently by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), though Washington State's Quiet Sound initiative that is actively working to create a larger centralized database by connecting more sightings data into WRAS.

The Coast Guard determined visual sightings are currently the primary method of ascertaining the location of large cetaceans in Puget Sound, effectively limiting the receipt of data to daylight hours and areas where people and vessels are located.

Education and Outreach

Effective education and outreach efforts are critical to informing vessel operators of applicable laws, regulations, and voluntary guidance for reducing the impact of vessel traffic on large cetaceans. The Cetacean Desk will leverage the Be Whale Wise joint educational campaign (Operation Be Whale Wise), which occurs in the Puget Sound region every summer from July through September, to proactively educate mariners. This targeted interagency effort focuses on educating the public and raising awareness within the boating community, including enforcing buffer zones and other vessel-related regulations in place to protect Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW) and other large cetaceans. Since 2018, Coast Guard units have conducted over 1,000 at-sea and dockside vessel contacts and outreach activities to educate and promote awareness. The Coast Guard will continue to look for additional ways to expand outreach and improve the effectiveness of education on cetacean protection regulations, laws, and guidelines.

Stakeholder Engagement

With the establishment of the Cetacean Desk, the Coast Guard joins a robust international team of agencies and organizations working toward the recovery and protection of at-risk large cetaceans in Puget Sound. The Coast Guard commenced project research by exploring existing partnerships and capabilities that could be leveraged for the Cetacean Desk's operation. Throughout this process, the Coast Guard met with project stakeholders, including NOAA, the U.S. Navy, Canadian Coast Guard, Transport Canada, Quiet Sound, Puget Sound Partnership, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington's Recreation and Conservation Office, the Puget Sound Harbor Safety Committee, Marine Exchange of Puget Sound, Puget Sound Pilots, Pacific Merchant Shipping Association, Washington State Ferries, and numerous cetacean-focused NGOs.

The Coast Guard also participates in the Puget Sound Harbor Safety Committee, various Quiet Sound committees, ECHO Vessel Operators Committee, Be Whale Wise partnership, and Washington State SRKW Intergovernmental Workgroup. As the Cetacean Desk continues operations, the Coast Guard will continue to connect with stakeholders to assess the pilot program's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement and growth.

The Coast Guard remains dedicated to upholding Tribal treaty rights by collecting input and fully addressing Tribal concerns with Cetacean Desk operations. The Coast Guard conducted outreach and initiated an informal consultation process with all federally recognized Tribes within the Puget Sound VTS operating area and will continue to engage throughout the duration of the pilot program.

III. Conclusion

The Coast Guard is committed to improving coordination with the maritime industry to reduce vessel-related risks to large cetaceans. The Cetacean Desk pilot program empowers vessel operators to take responsible action on the water around cetaceans with enhanced situational awareness and knowledge of applicable laws, regulations, and guidelines.

The Coast Guard will continue to explore ways to cooperate with and support agency partners, incorporate additional cetacean location data sources, and improve the utility of the information disseminated to vessel operators as the pilot program evolves. Continuous improvement is a guiding principle for the Cetacean Desk pilot program, and the Coast Guard will continue to advance program effectiveness in preventing vessel strikes and mitigating the impacts of underwater noise and vessel presence on large cetaceans in the Puget Sound region.

Appendix: Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Definition
ECHO	Enhancing Cetacean Habitat and Observation Program
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
SRKW	Southern Resident Killer Whales
VTS	Vessel Traffic Service
VHF	Very High Frequency
WRAS	WhaleReport Alert System