



March 12, 2026

To: All Oceangoing Carriers

The [Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program \(BWBS\)](#) is pleased to announce the details of the 2026 voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) Season.

[The program is expanding protections under California Assembly Bill 14 as a statewide voluntary program](#), with California's Ocean Protection Council as a new stakeholder. Statewide expansion will bring public health benefits of reduced air pollution to additional areas and better protect endangered and threatened blue, fin, and humpback whales, which are protected under the Federal Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.¹

For the 2026 season, the VSR request will go into effect **April 22 through December 31** off the coast of California. Oceangoing vessels 300 gross tons (GT) or larger are asked to travel at 10 knots or less in the VSR zone during the program dates. This will reduce the risk of fatal ship strikes to whales, reduce ocean noise, and protect public health along the California coast. Please see the attached 2026 VSR zone, as well as further context below on the updated map.

BWBS updated the VSR zone boundaries based upon the latest data regarding vessel behavior, important whale habitat, as well as prevailing onshore air pollution flow from vessel traffic. This updated zone is optimized for both conservation benefit, and to provide industry a simplified zone that is more straightforward for navigation and planning purposes. We recognize that the expansion of the VSR zone will require adjustments to operations and voyage planning, and cannot overstate our appreciation for the efforts of mariners to achieve high cooperation rates with the program over the past decade.

Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program 2026 Season Incentive Program

The following shipping sectors are encouraged to enroll in the Protecting Blue Whales and Blues Skies Program and are eligible for public recognition incentives: container, car carrier, bulk, general cargo, tanker, and - new this year - cruise lines.

The structure of the 2026 BWBS VSR program will be similar to the 2025 program. Positive press and public relations incentives will be awarded to participating vessel operators based on percent of distance traveled by all of their vessels through the VSR zone at 10 knots or less, termed "percent of cooperation," during the program dates. Participation is voluntary and if an enrolled company is unable to meet the minimum program criteria, there is no penalty, but public relations and positive press incentives will not be awarded. Any nautical miles transited

¹ Blue, fin, and humpback whales are protected under the Federal Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1538 et seq.) the Marine Mammal Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 1361 et seq.), and the National Marine Sanctuaries Act (16 U.S.C. 1431 et seq.). Any unauthorized take of whales, even if unintentional, by vessels transiting in U.S. waters violates federal statutes.



by BWBS participating vessels within an Area To Be Avoided (ATBA) will not be counted.

Companies that enrolled in the program in the 2025 VSR Season will remain enrolled in the program per the Participant Agreement's three-year term. These companies will be provided an updated Attachment A to reflect the 2026 VSR Season Program Dates and VSR Map, and Attachment B to reflect the 2026 VSR Award Tiers. Companies not currently enrolled are required to sign a Participant Agreement to be eligible for program benefits.

Award Tier Changes

BWBS sincerely appreciates industry's engagement with the program, including feedback to the surveys and opportunities BWBS provided for mariners and industry representatives to share their perspectives on VSR zone expansion. We also understand that the expansion of the voluntary VSR zone for the 2026 Season may require voyage planning adjustments which may take additional time to implement. To assist with this transition, we are adjusting the 2026 Award Tiers.

BWBS is making the following adjustments to the Award Tiers for the 2026 Season:

- 2026 Award Tier Expanded Eligibility:
 - The Sapphire Award will include 75-100% cooperation rates
 - The Gold Award will include 50-74%
 - The Blue Sky Award will include 30-49%
- Star Sapphire: Participants that achieve 90%+ cooperation rates will be awarded a new "Star Sapphire" distinction in 2026. This will include an upgraded Whale Tail award, as well as specialized recognition.

Please note that areas offshore of the 2026 VSR Zone include important habitat for threatened and endangered whales, as well as regions where oceangoing vessel emissions impact air quality. BWBS looks forward to reviewing the results of the 2026 VSR Season and engaging with oceangoing carriers and industry representatives to gather insights and feedback on the possible expansion of 2027 program design to best optimize the program for conservation benefit and industry participation going forward.

Please enroll by April 22 to receive customized monthly cooperation reports during the VSR season. Enrollments after April 22 will be accepted, but ship speeds during the entire 2026 VSR Season will be included and analyzed in all award level and participation determinations.

For more information, including the Participation Agreement, Attachments, zone files and other details for oceangoing carrier participants, please visit: bluewhalesblueskies.org/operators/

Enrollment materials, comments, or questions may be directed to Jessica Morten (jessica.morten@noaa.gov) and Danielle Alvarez (dalvarez@californiamsf.org).



Other Considerations

For all oceangoing carriers ≥ 300 GT, please note rerouting outside the VSR zone at speeds greater than 10 knots has the potential to disrupt other ocean uses, including Department of Defense activities and customary maritime commerce routes. Rerouting may also increase risk of impacts on whales and air emissions. Consequently, we discourage rerouting outside the VSR zone at speeds exceeding 10 knots.

We request oceangoing vessels transit in designated Traffic Separation Schemes (TSS) and recommended routes, as well as outside ATBAs to reduce overlap with important endangered whale habitat. Whenever possible, please prioritize use of the western traffic lane of the San Francisco Offshore TSS, and comply with any instruction received by the U.S. Navy when traveling in weapons training areas, e.g. south of the Channel Islands.

Vessels may deviate from the voluntary speed and routing recommendations whenever necessary to maintain safe maneuvering.

For more information on the seasonal VSR advisory, please consult the U.S. Coast Guard Southwest Local Notice to Mariners.

We commend your commitment to protecting endangered and threatened whales and public health by cooperating with the voluntary VSR request and sincerely appreciate the efforts of all shipping lines. By working together, we can offer a powerful demonstration that maritime commerce and conservation can coexist.

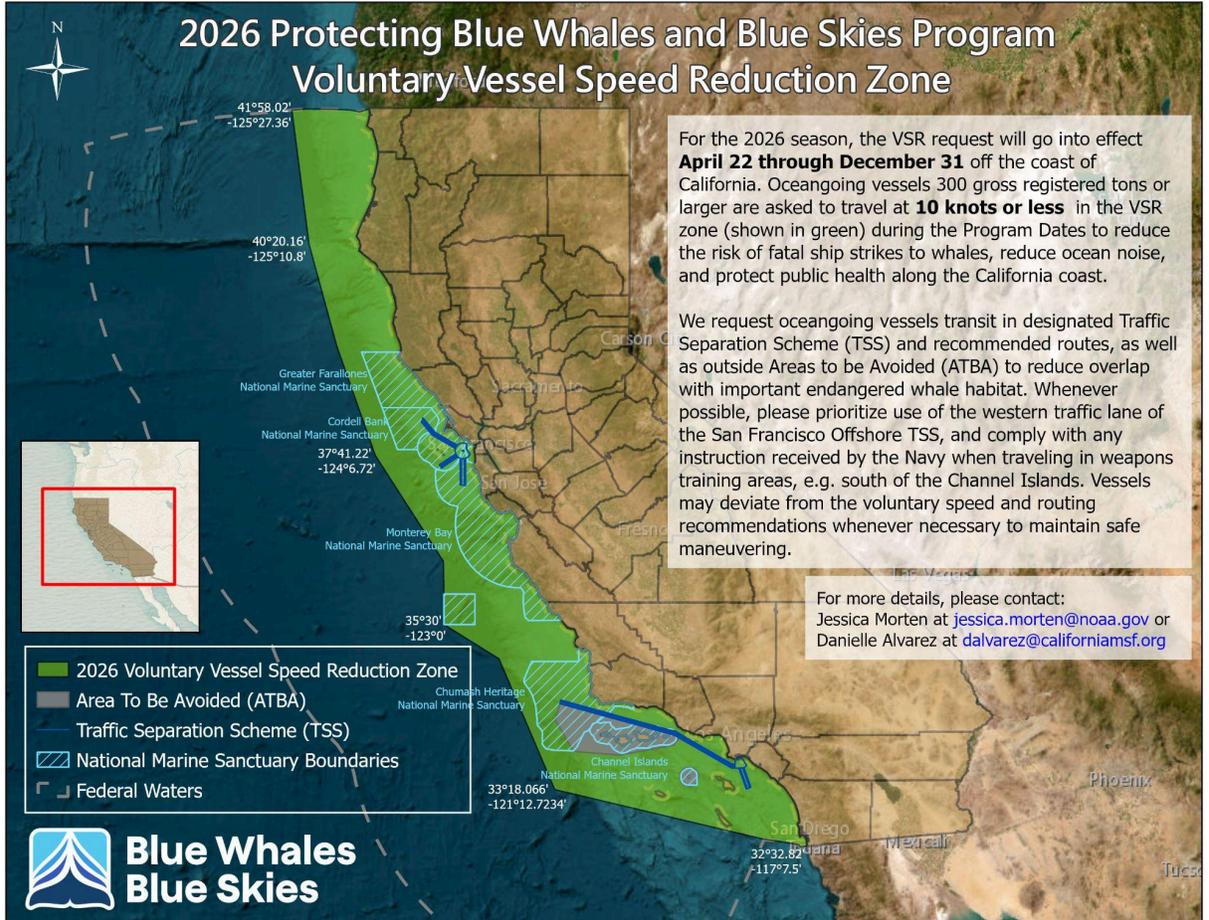
Respectfully,

[Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Coalition](#)



A collaborative partnership for safer whales, cleaner air and a quieter ocean since 2014. For more information: bluewhalesblueskies.org

2026 Voluntary Vessel Speed Reduction Zone Map and Coordinates



Map source: Jess Morten/NOAA ONMS

This map is not to be used for navigational purposes

11 MARCH 2026

Point	Latitude	Longitude
1	41.97	-125.46
2	40.34	-125.18
3	37.69	-124.11
4	36.32	-123.00
5	35.50	-123.00
6	35.05	-122.10
7	33.30	-121.21
8	32.55	-117.13