By Gareth McGrath
Staff Writer

The federal government wants to protect one of the world’s most endangered mammals by slowing down ships heading to and from East Coast ports, including Wilmington.

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20 nautical miles out and limit ship speeds within the area to 12 knots, or 13.8 mph. Morehead City’s zone, with similar speed restrictions, would extend 25 miles out.

Based on 2002 numbers, the federal government estimates that the proposed restrictions would have delayed Wilmington-bound ships by an average of 15 minutes and cost $179,000.

The time delay and cost, which would have impacted an estimated 42 percent of Wilmington’s total ship traffic, was among the lowest for East Coast ports.

In the busier Hampton Roads area, for example, the slow-go zone would have added 52 minutes to a ship’s journey and cost more than $2.2 million.

NOAA’s Dr. Silber said the proposed rules represent a balance between competing needs.

“This is a population that’s highly depleted, recovering slowly with ship strikes a major problem, and we’re required under the law to try and address that,” he said.

**Local visitor**

Port and shipping officials are careful to state that they support the government’s effort to protect the Atlantic right whale.

“When you get down to around 300 members of a species, that’s cutting it pretty thin,” said Layton Bedsole, director of environmental affairs for the N.C. State Ports Authority.

But the proposed regulations also are raising concerns.

“We just don’t want to see ports in one region disadvantaged over another,” said Aaron Ellis, spokesman for the American Association of Port Authorities. “We want there to be even-handedness across the country.”

He added that the association also wants to see a comprehensive study looking at all aspects of the proposed strategy, including scientific proof that rerouting ships and reducing their speed would have the desired effect of reducing whale fatalities.

“We don’t think that’s been shown yet,” Mr. Ellis said.

Mr. Bedsole said the ports authority supports further research into the matter, particularly an in-depth economic analysis of the rules’ impacts.

But as long as any new rules are applied coast-wide, he said he expected them to have a limited effect on the port’s operations and bottom line.

**On the Web:** For more information on the proposed strategies to reduce ship strikes on the North Atlantic right whale, visit [www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/shipstrike/)

Ports spokeswoman Karen Fox added that while fast turnaround is important, it is just one of many factors shipping companies look at when picking their ports of call.

Others include cost, proximity to markets, availability, and geographic location.

During public hearings in North Carolina last year, fishermen and charter boat operators raised concerns about the rules applying to all vessels over 65 feet – although Dr. Silber said that’s still open for discussion.

There also has been some grumbling that the Navy and the Coast Guard would be exempt from the new restrictions.

Mr. McLellan also said that while the new strategies might not be the right whale’s last chance at staving off extinction, it might be its best.

“We have to do everything we can to keep these animals from going extinct, and this is one of those steps,” he said.

And then there’s the local hook.

Although the whales have been long thought to calf much further south than Cape Fear – around the Georgia-Florida state line – Mr. McLellan said new research is showing they don’t stick to such rigid areas.

One mother is believed to have given birth last year within eyesight of Johnnie Mercers Fishing Pier at Wrightsville Beach.

“Here, in our backyard, we have one of the rarest mammals in the world, and I think that’s pretty cool and something worth protecting,” Mr. McLellan said.

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A female North American right whale and her calf swim offshore of Wrightsville Beach on Dec. 30.