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March 15, 2023

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NJDEP STATEMENT ON EAST COAST WHALE MORTALITIES

(23/P021) TRENTON – In consultation with [NOAA Fisheries](#), the lead federal agency responsible for evaluating potential impacts to marine life and habitats from human activities in federal waters, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has been monitoring an unusual humpback whale mortality event that has been affecting Atlantic coast states since January 2016. In January of this year, the DEP began receiving concerns from stakeholders that the development of offshore wind energy infrastructure off New Jersey's coast is causing whale mortality. All offshore wind survey activities have been permitted by NOAA Fisheries and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and deemed safe for marine mammals, i.e., no injurious activities have been permitted for offshore wind developers.

As of March 2023, no offshore wind-related construction activities have taken place in waters off the New Jersey coast, and DEP is aware of no credible evidence that offshore wind-related survey activities could cause whale mortality. While DEP has no reason to conclude that whale mortality is attributable to offshore wind-related activities, DEP will continue to monitor.

However, DEP remains concerned that ocean temperatures, which are projected to increase due to human-caused climate change caused primarily by the burning of fossil fuels, will continue to adversely impact marine mammals, including whales, their food sources, habitats, and migration patterns, as summarized in the [New Jersey Scientific Report on Climate Change](#) (Chapter 5.9). Due to these changes in ocean temperature and water chemistry, populations of marine species – including menhaden, a key whale food source—adapt by moving into new areas where conditions are more favorable. Changes that draw prey fish landward similarly increase the risk that these fish and their predators, including whales, may be drawn into conflict with human activities, such as vessel strikes that may increase whale mortality.

DEP is dedicated to the conservation, protection, and restoration of all natural resources, including aquatic habitats and the fish and wildlife that rely upon the sound management of marine environments. In fulfilling this mission, DEP administers [New Jersey's Coastal Zone Management Program](#), regulates certain activities in state waters, including the development of energy-generating facilities and infrastructure, and otherwise coordinates environmental reviews with federal government agencies. DEP expects that all regulated entities, including offshore wind project sponsors, pursue development objectives responsibly, including assessing potential environmental impacts and avoiding, minimizing, and mitigating likely adverse effects upon natural resources, including marine mammals and their habitats.

In addition, the Offshore Wind Research & Monitoring Initiative (RMI), a collaborative effort of the DEP and BPU, has authorized \$8.5 million in funding to date for scientific efforts to ensure the safe and ecologically responsible development of offshore wind energy. As part of the BPU's second wind energy solicitation, Atlantic Shores Offshore Wind, LLC, and Ocean Wind II, LLC committed \$10,000 per megawatt of project-nameplate capacity awarded – a total of about \$26 million – to fund regional research and ecological monitoring of the environmental impacts of offshore wind. The projects are being implemented by a variety of academic and research entities and include work to evaluate and minimize impacts to a variety of marine wildlife, including whales.

For more details on RMI, visit <https://dep.nj.gov/offshorewind/rmi/>. Click on the "Projects" tab for more information on the various research projects.

For information from NOAA on humpback whale mortalities, visit [2016–2023 Humpback Whale Unusual Mortality Event Along the Atlantic Coast | NOAA Fisheries](#)

For a DEP microsite on whale mortalities, visit <https://dep.nj.gov/humpback-whale-unusual-mortality-event/>



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Last Update: March 15, 2023