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World's largest shipping lines transiting 'Whale-Safer' yields big impact for whales, air quality & underwater noise

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By [Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program \(BWBS\)](#) 10/03/2025

Each year, Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies (BWBS) works to incentivise [the world's largest shipping companies to opt in to "whale-safer" speeds \(10 knots or less\)](#) off California to help reduce fatal strike risk to whales, as well as air and underwater noise pollution. After the Vessel Speed Reduction (VSR) season (May to December) ends, BWBS analyses vessel AIS data to determine enrolled fleets' cooperation levels, identifies which shipping lines reduced speeds, and analyses how this translates to quantifiable impact.

For the 2024 season, BWBS verified that 743 vessels, across 49 shipping lines, opted in for 425,981 nautical miles of whale-safer and improved air quality behaviour. [Twenty-three of those lines qualified for the coveted "Sapphire" award](#) by achieving 85%+ of total distance traveled in the VSR zones at whale-safer speeds, including: CMA CGM; Connaught Shipmanagement HK; Cosco Shipping; CSL Americas; Hong Kong Top Honor Shipping; ISM Ship Management; Maersk; Marathon Petroleum; MSC; NYK Ro-Ro; Ocean Network Express; OOCL; OSG Ship Management; Pilon Navigation; ConocoPhillips – Polar Tankers; Starbulk; STX Marine

Service Co; Swire Shipping; Teo Shipping Corp; Tomini Transports; Toyofuji; Wallenius Wilhelmsen; and Yang Ming Marine Transport Corp.



Reports related to reduced risk of fatal strikes, ocean noise, air pollution and emissions [can be found here](#). Highlights:

Ship Strike Risk Reduction:

- **2024 results:** Research partners with Point Blue Conservation Science compared in-season transit speeds of participating transits to out-of-season speeds and quantified the reduction in fatal strike risk associated with that change. The analyses show that transits of participating vessels posed a 50.1% lower strike mortality risk to whales.
- **Context:** Globally, the top two leading causes of mortality to whales include collisions with large vessels – known as ship strikes – and entanglements. One of the main goals of the programme is to decrease the risk of fatal ship strikes from large vessels. Lower speeds both reduce the risk of serious injuries to whales and allow whales more time to avoid impact. Moreover, this benefit scales with the number of participating vessels and the total distance traveled at safer speeds. As the number of participating vessels grows, the absolute benefit to whales increases accordingly.

Underwater Noise Pollution:

- **2024 results:** Research partners from Scripps Institution of Oceanography analysed acoustic data and found that, across all programme zones, the source levels of participating vessels was reduced by 38%, or 4.1 dB decibels, when the 2024 programme was active versus inactive.
- **Context:** Whales have evolved over the millennia to use sound for their daily life functions — to navigate, communicate, and keep in contact during long migrations. Noise pollution disrupts these essential behaviours, threatening their ability to thrive. Implementing vessel speed reduction programmes in regions with high whale presence is a crucial step in mitigating the harmful effects of chronic noise pollution and protecting these vulnerable species.

Air Quality & Greenhouse Gas Emissions:

- **2024 results:** Research partners compared in-season transit speeds of participating transits to historic, out-of-season speeds and quantified the reduction in emissions associated with that change. Analyses show the programme resulted in estimated reductions of 1,405 tons of oxides of nitrogen (NOx) – equivalent to taking 900,000 cars off the road for a year, 33 tons of oxides of sulfur (SOx), and 8.4 tons of diesel particulate matter, and a reduction of 49,945 tonnes of regional greenhouse gases.
- **Context:** When most fossil-fuel burning ships reduce speeds to the “whale-safer” threshold, it also decreases air pollution and emissions by about 27% from baseline. NOx, a key contributor to ozone, is of particular concern for many communities, especially those overburdened by ports, high traffic, and industrial infrastructure. Ocean-going vessels contribute a large portion of the smog-forming NOx emissions affecting coastal California communities.

The environmental benefits show that this programme is making a cumulative impact. “It’s been amazing to witness the growth of this

environmental benefits achieved. From seven shipping lines reducing speed in 2014 to 49 shipping lines opting in for 2024, this programme serves as a shining example of what can be accomplished when government agencies, industry, and conservationists work together," said Jess Morten, of the California Marine Sanctuary Foundation.

www.bluewhalesblueskies.org/results

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