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Environmentalists eye East Coast whale rules

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JUNEAU--Environmentalists are hoping to extend proposed East Coast restrictions to protect whales from collisions with ships in Alaska and on the West Coast.

Their efforts come after the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced proposed rules aimed at reducing ship strikes on the North Atlantic right whale along the East Coast. NOAA will take comments until Aug. 2.

Environmentalists say the agency should issue a rule that applies to the coasts off Alaska, California, Oregon and Washington because of problems with whale strikes.

"We're saying we need to look at a similar strategy for the West," said Teri Shore of Bluewater Network in San Francisco.

Environmentalists want similar speed and routing restrictions, and aerial surveys that NOAA is proposing for the East Coast, Shore said.

The cruise ship industry is aware of NOAA's notice, but sees it as an East Coast issue for now, officials said Monday.

"They (company officials) certainly pay attention to the environmental groups, NOAA and how they will apply to other regions," said Linda Huston, Southeast Regional Manager for Holland America Line and Gray Line.

Whale strikes are an issue on the East Coast because the right whale is endangered there, Huston said.

"Every region needs to stand on its own and how it's unique to itself," she told the Juneau Empire.

The cruise ship industry is likely to oppose blanket restrictions along the West Coast, said Don Habeger, director of industrial relations for Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd.

Cruise ships already adhere to restrictions of running at 10 knots or less in Glacier Bay because it's a popular whale feeding area, Habeger said.