




air pollution control district
SANTA BARBARA COUNTY

Agenda Item: G-3
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Continued Item: No

Board Agenda Item

TO: Air Pollution Control District Board

FROM: Aeron Arlin Genet, Air Pollution Control Officer 

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SUBJECT: Update on the Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program

RECOMMENDATION:

Receive and file a presentation on the Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies (BWBS) program.

BACKGROUND:

Large ocean-going vessels that travel along the California coastline and into California's ports are a major source of air pollution, as they emit significant amounts of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) – which is an ozone precursor – and other pollutants. Over the long term, international rules will require cleaner engines on newly built vessels, which will reduce NO_x emissions from this sector. However, fleet turnover in this industry does not happen quickly, and it is expected to take at least 10 more years to significantly phase out the older, dirtier engines. In the meantime, the marine shipping sector continues to be the largest source of ozone precursor emissions in Santa Barbara County.

Since 2014, the District and partners have implemented the Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies vessel speed reduction (VSR) program – which is a partnership between coastal California air districts, state and federal government agencies, national marine sanctuaries, marine sanctuary foundations, and several other nonprofit organizations and environmental groups – for immediate air quality and whale protection benefits. This voluntary program asks operators to decrease their vessel speeds to 10 knots or less within the California VSR zone, which as of the 2026 BWBS season, has been expanded statewide. Vessel speed reduction increases the fuel efficiency of most vessels and reduces emissions of multiple air pollutants, including NO_x, greenhouse gases (GHGs), particulate matter (PM), and toxic air contaminants. Reducing NO_x emissions through voluntary incentives is a critical part of the District's strategy to help prevent exceedances of the state and federal ozone standards. Reducing vessel speeds also lowers the risk of fatal ship strikes on endangered whale populations and reduces ocean noise that can interfere with whale communication, navigation, and feeding.

Aeron Arlin Genet, Air Pollution Control Officer

DISCUSSION:

The following topics related to the District’s Protecting Blue Whales and Blue Skies Program will be covered in this section:

- 2025 BWBS Program Results;
- 2025 BWBS Program Recognition and Outreach;
- Assembly Bill 14 and BWBS Statewide Expansion; and
- 2026 BWBS Program Launch and Technical Advisory Working Sessions.

2025 BWBS Program Results

The 2025 BWBS Program was implemented successfully from May 1, 2025 to January 15, 2026, which is the time period that coincides with peak ozone levels as well as the presence of migrating blue, humpback, and fin whales near the California coast. The program continues to focus on large container ships and auto carriers since these ships have higher speeds and generate more emissions, but bulk vessels and tankers are also invited to participate. In 2025, participation included 787 vessels operated by 44 different shipping companies. These companies account for 83% of all containership vessels and 93% of all auto carrier vessels that pass through the region.

All participating vessel operators were asked to voluntarily slow to 10 knots or less in the VSR zones, and Automatic Identification System (AIS) receivers were used to track the speeds of each vessel during the season. Depending on the company’s level of cooperation (calculated as the percent of distance travelled at 10 knots or less for their entire fleet), companies were ranked in award categories. For the 2025 Program, 22 companies achieved the Sapphire award level (90-100% cooperation), 10 companies achieved Gold (70-89% cooperation), and 10 companies achieved Blue Sky (50-69% cooperation). The shipping companies that were recognized for their high-performance (50% cooperation and above) in the 2025 Program and their award levels are listed below in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Company Awards for the 2025 BWBS Program



As detailed in Attachment A, the 2025 results show that the 11th anniversary of the BWBS Program was the most effective year to date, with an overall cooperation rate of 85% from these shipping companies. The AIS data is also used to help quantify the environmental benefits for the marine environment and coastal California communities. In total, the shipping companies reduced smog-forming NOx emissions by almost 1,500 tons, diesel PM emissions by approximately 9 tons, and greenhouse gases by over 55,000 metric tons along the California coast in 2025. These numbers represent an approximate 27% reduction in pollution from the participating ships, as compared to baseline conditions. For comparison, the 2025 NOx reductions are equivalent to converting 900,000 passenger vehicles to zero-emission for a single year. As for the marine benefits, program partners have quantified the whale protection and noise reduction metrics for the 2025 Program. Researchers at the University of Washington estimated that the risk of fatal ship strikes was reduced by 40%, and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography estimated a reduction in ocean noise by 5.2 decibels per transit, which is a 70% reduction in underwater acoustic intensity from participating vessels).

2025 BWBS Program Recognition and Outreach

The 2025 Program continued to focus on positive recognition incentives for the participating companies instead of providing financial incentives. This approach was initiated in 2023 due to the majority of the financial incentives being generously declined by the companies in order to help maintain the program and recognition efforts. Even without the financial incentives, the program continues to grow as it focuses on the value of positive media coverage and marketing campaigns for participating companies, as well as drawing industry and public awareness to the BWBS Program.

Outreach for the 2025 Program included various news releases issued by the partners, social media posts, a program fact sheet that highlights the participating companies, and articles and advertisements in trade and business journals. On April 22, 2026, an award ceremony for the 2025 BWBS Program was held at Scott's in Jack London Square, near the Port of Oakland. Physical awards were handed out to the companies that attended the event and the remaining awards were mailed to the participating companies that weren't able to attend. Photos from the awards ceremony will be shown during the staff presentation and will be used in future recognition materials. The BWBS partnership also staffed a booth at Underwater Parks Day at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Sea Center on January 17 to help conduct outreach on the program to the general public and local organizations.

Since 2022, the program has maintained a Brand Ambassador component. Any company that ships with one or more of the BWBS Program participants is eligible to become a Brand Ambassador. Ambassadors help advocate for more sustainable shipping and are committed to reducing air pollution, regional GHGs, underwater noise, and ship strikes on endangered whales. To date, 37 companies and the Ports of Oakland and Hueneme have become Brand Ambassadors for this program.

Assembly Bill (AB) 14 and BWBS Statewide Expansion

AB 14 was introduced in December 2024 by Assemblymember Gregg Hart and received unanimous support as it passed through the State Assembly and Senate in 2025. Leading up to passage of AB 14, the District worked with the BWBS Program partners to help urge the passage of the bill, as it provides additional support for continuing and expanding the emission-reduction and whale conservation benefits from the current voluntary vessel speed reduction program. Ultimately, the bill was signed into law by Governor Newsom on October 11, 2025. The successful passage of AB 14 codified the state legislature's support for the existing BWBS Program and authorized its expansion to a statewide voluntary VSR program along the entire California coast for the 2026 VSR season.

After AB 14 was signed into law, the BWBS partners notified the BWBS Program participants and the broader shipping industry about the upcoming statewide expansion through email correspondence, news releases, newsletters, social media, paid advertisements, and public communications. Over the course of the next few months, feedback was solicited and collected on the proposed statewide expansion of the VSR zone through online surveys, calls with shipping lines, and briefings that were held with the U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, California Ocean Protection Council, Marine Exchanges, industry trade groups, and other stakeholders. Additionally, in March 2026, District staff presented an update on the BWBS Program to the California Ocean Protection Council. Based on the feedback received from stakeholders, several adjustments were made to the statewide zone design, season start date, and award tiers leading up to the launch of the 2026 VSR season.

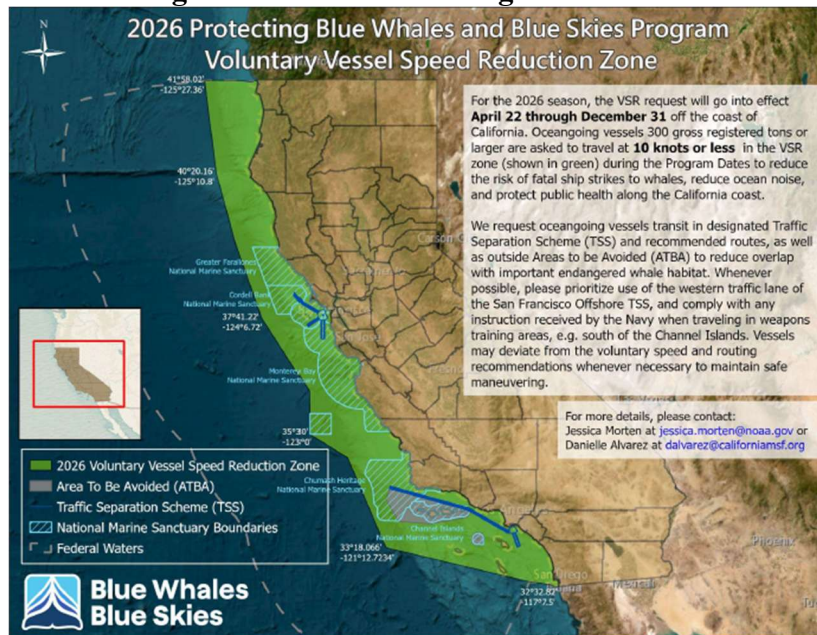
2026 BWBS Program Launch

The 2026 BWBS program launched on April 22 and will run through December 31, 2026. The 2026 Program incorporates several changes from prior years. The first change is that the VSR zone has expanded statewide to include the entire California coast. The initial zone design included further westward expansion of the statewide zone but was scaled back based on feedback from stakeholders. The final 2026 VSR zone is shown below in Figure 2. The second key change is that the cooperation rates to meet the award tiers were relaxed, as shown below, to provide additional flexibility to program participants to help ease the transition to an expanded statewide zone:

- Blue Sky Award: 30-49% cooperation (previously 50-69%);
- Gold Award: 50-74% cooperation (previously 70-89%);
- Sapphire Award: 75-89% cooperation (previously 90-100%); and
- Star Sapphire Award: new category created to recognize high achieving participants that achieve cooperation rates of 90% and above.

The third key change is that cruise lines are now invited to participate in the BWBS program. Lastly, the fourth key change is regarding the season start date and a transitional period for implementing the new statewide VSR zone. Although the BWBS partnership was aiming for an April 1 start date, April 22 was ultimately chosen to allow for additional time for program participants to plan for statewide expansion. Furthermore, based on feedback from stakeholders, the beginning of the BWBS season from April 22 – June 30, 2026 is a transitional period to help BWBS participants adapt to the expanded statewide VSR zone. During the transitional period, performance tracking and program award tier recognition will be evaluated based on cooperation rates within the voluntary 2025 VSR zone boundaries. Starting July 1, 2026, performance tracking and program award tier recognition will fully transition to the newly expanded voluntary 2026 VSR zone. Shipping lines who choose to voluntarily transition to the 2026 expanded statewide zone early will receive special recognition at the end of the season for achieving “Early Adopter” status.

Figure 2: 2026 BWBS Program VSR Zone



In conjunction with the launch of the 2026 VSR season, the BWBS Program will be hosting a series of technical advisory working sessions. The working sessions have three primary objectives: 1) establish a forum for ongoing stakeholder engagement and coordination to enhance the program's benefits; 2) share the parameters and technical details of the program; and 3) seek feedback from shipping line participants and other stakeholders. The first working session was held virtually on June 4, 2026 and covered the development process for the 2026 statewide expanded VSR zone as well as an in-depth presentation on the air emission quantification methodology and various air emission technical analyses.

As of June 15, 59 shipping companies have enrolled in the program, showing that the BWBS Program continues to grow and there is interest from shipping companies to continue to participate in the expanded statewide VSR zone. Additional information and materials related to the 2026 BWBS Program, as well as the previous programs, are available on the BWBS Program's website at www.bluewhalesblueskies.org.

FISCAL IMPACT:

District staff time spent implementing the 2025 BWBS program was included in the District's adopted budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025-26 and staff time spent implementing the 2026 BWBS Program is included in the District's proposed budget for FY 2026-27. The District receives compensation for staff time spent implementing the BWBS Program through a California Air Resources Board Supplemental Environmental Project (SEP) Oversight Agreement managed by Ventura County Air Pollution Control District. The SEP program allows community-based projects to be funded from a portion of the penalties received during settlement of state enforcement actions. The approximate revenue for the District's portion of the 2025 BWBS Program is \$70,520 and the budgeted revenue for the 2026 BWBS Program is \$88,138.

ATTACHMENT:

- A. BWBS Program Summary: 2014 to 2025.

ATTACHMENT A

BWBS Program Summary: 2014 to 2025

June 25, 2026

Santa Barbara County Air Pollution Control District
Board of Directors

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Santa Maria, California 93455



**Protecting
Blue Whales
and Blue Skies**

Vessel Speed Reduction Program

Program Year	2014	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
VSR Zone	Santa Barbara Channel		Santa Barbara Channel & San Francisco Bay Region			Southern California & San Francisco Bay Region			+ Monterey Bay NMS		+ Chumash NMS
Vessel Applicability	Containerships & Auto Carriers							+ Bulk & General	+ Tankers		
Program Duration	4 months	4.5 months			6 months			7.5 months		8 months	8.5 months
# Companies	7	10	11	12	15	16	18	23	33	49	44
# Vessels	14	25	44	295	349	482	545	671	709	743	787
Slow-speed Distance (nautical miles)	2,700	5,000	12,630	46,026	99,019	181,306	179,530	268,377	375,437	425,983	481,273
Overall Fleet Cooperation	--	--	--	36%	55%	60%	64%	78%	81%	85%	85%
NOx Reductions (tons)	12.4	25.6	84	266	536	748	650	921	1,256	1,405	1,491
Regional GHG Reductions (metric tons)	535	1,005	2,630	8,668	17,026	24,258	22,201	32,604	45,784	49,945	55,771
Ocean Noise Reduction (dB / transit)	--	--	--	1.0	--	2.3	4.1	4.6	5.4	4.1	5.2
Fatal Ship Strike Risk Reduction *	--	--	--	--	--	35%	50%	44%	58%	50%	40%

* Represents the proportional decrease in risk from participating vessels and not absolute estimates of mortality avoided.