

## An Open Letter to the Biden Administration

We, the undersigned, are marine scientists united in our concern for the Gulf of Mexico whale, also known as Rice's whale, the only baleen whale known to be resident to the Gulf and one of the most endangered marine mammal species on the planet.

Early last year, in an effort led by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, scientists confirmed that the whale constitutes a unique species, one that has diverged from other baleen whales through long isolation in the Gulf.<sup>1</sup> A mature Gulf of Mexico whale extends about 40 feet in length and is sleek in form; it has a spectacular vocal repertoire, making a long call that has not been heard in other species.<sup>2</sup> This cetacean is also critically endangered.<sup>3</sup> The agency currently estimates that the entire species has a population of only 51 individuals.<sup>4</sup> With so few whales in limited habitat, the species is highly vulnerable to effects from human activities.

Continued oil and gas development in the Gulf represents a clear, existential threat to the whale's survival and recovery. The government's Natural Resource Damage Assessment on the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill estimates that nearly 20 percent of Gulf of Mexico whales were killed, with additional animals suffering reproductive failure and disease.<sup>5</sup> The species is also subject to chronic exposure to noise from seismic oil and gas exploration, which dominates the acoustic environment through much of the northern Gulf.<sup>6</sup> Airgun surveys have far-reaching effects on baleen whales, including the masking of biologically important sounds and the disruption of activities vital to feeding and reproduction over large ocean areas.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Vessel collisions are another significant threat to the species. At night, Gulf of Mexico whales come to rest within the upper 15 meters of the water column, leaving them acutely vulnerable to ship strikes.<sup>10</sup> One stranded whale, a lactating female, was found with injuries consistent with blunt force trauma; another, a free-swimming individual, has been observed with spinal deformities consistent with a collision injury.<sup>1</sup> A number of shipping routes traverse the whales' habitat along the northern Gulf, and the collision risk is likely to increase with new offshore oil and gas development. With abundance so low, the loss of even a single whale threatens the survival of the species.

Gulf of Mexico whales can recover. They continue to produce calves, and our experience with other baleen whales shows that populations can rebound as conditions improve. But Gulf of Mexico whales are on the edge of extinction, and measures are urgently needed to reduce mortality and serious injury as well as to alleviate human stressors. Aquaculture, offshore wind farms, and other new development should always be sited outside of their known habitat, which is limited to a strip of water running along the continental shelf break from the eastern through the central and western Gulf. Vessels transiting through the whales' habitat should be required to slow down and take other measures to reduce the risk of a fatal collision.

In the case of oil and gas development, protecting the species means excluding leasing and other activities from the whale's habitat; prohibiting seismic airgun surveys to prevent exposure of the whales and their habitat to what has become the dominant source of noise in the northern Gulf;<sup>6</sup> and disallowing drilling in areas both inside and outside of the whale's habitat, such as in the Mississippi Canyon, that pose a catastrophic risk to the species. Habitat in the eastern, central, and western Gulf must be protected. Your Administration is presently considering a new five-year program for offshore oil and gas leasing, as well as a new regulation and related permits and authorizations for seismic surveys in the Gulf of Mexico. Continuing with seismic exploration or drilling in the northern Gulf is antithetical to basic principles of conservation and would jeopardize the species' survival and recovery.

The Gulf of Mexico whale is a unique part of the Gulf's natural history and the only large whale species resident year-round in the waters of the United States. Yet few on-water measures have been established to protect it. Unless significant conservation actions are taken, the United States is likely to cause the first anthropogenic extinction of a great whale species.<sup>11,12</sup>

On this, the fiftieth anniversary year of the nation's commitment to whales through the passage of the Marine Mammal Protection Act, we urge you to announce robust conservation measures to protect the Gulf of Mexico whale as well as funding for its recovery.

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