VESSEL STRIKE AVOIDANCE FUND
2026 REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) is committed to operating in full compliance with all applicable laws, regulations, and Executive Orders. We continuously monitor legal and regulatory developments to ensure our policies, procedures, and operations align with current federal directives. We encourage all applicants to do the same.

The ability and extent to which NFWF is able to make awards is contingent upon receipt of funds from federal agencies and/or other funding partners. Final funding decisions will be made based on the applications received and the level and timing of funding received by NFWF.

TIMELINE

Dates of activities are subject to change. Please check the program page of the NFWF website for the most current dates and information on the Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund.

Pre-Proposal Applicant Webinar (Register here)		March 25, 2026, 2:00 pm EST
Pre-Proposal Due Date		**April 15, 2026, by 11:59 pm EST**
Invitations for Full Proposals Sent		May 2026
Full Proposal Due Date	**(By Invite Only)**	**June 24, 2026, by 11:59 pm EST**
Awards Announced		November 2026

OVERVIEW

NFWF is soliciting proposals to promote the development and adoption of innovative technologies that can help reduce vessel strikes of the endangered North Atlantic right whale (right whale) and other large whales.

The right whale is an endangered species, and vessel strikes are one of the major human-induced threats to their continued health and ability to recover. The whales' habitat and migration routes are dynamic but overlap with major ports, harbors, shipping lanes, and areas of heavy recreational boating use along the Atlantic coastline, making right whales vulnerable to collisions with vessels that can be fatal. Generally, the faster a vessel is traveling when it hits a whale, the higher the likelihood of serious injury or death.

Current measures for right whale conservation require most vessels over 65 ft to adhere to speed restrictions within designated seasonal areas where right whales are likely to be present. Temporary voluntary measures are also declared when right whales have been visually or acoustically detected in areas where mandatory measures are not in place. Despite these measures, strikes involving a variety of size classes continue to negatively impact the species. While slowing vessel speeds can be an effective means to reduce vessel strike threats, slow speed measures alone cannot fully resolve these issues, and speed restriction measures impact commercial and recreational use of

coastal waters. The deployment of existing, in development, or future technologies, innovative tools, and engineering approaches may have the potential to decrease the likelihood of collisions with whales and help reduce operational impacts to vessels. The goal of the Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund is to accelerate the development and testing of technologies and innovations to help further right whale and other large whale conservation and coexistence with humans.

The Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund program is a partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), with additional support provided by Toyota Motors North America.

GRANT AWARD INFORMATION

Grants will likely range between $250,000 and $750,000, but applicants seeking grants larger or smaller than that range are eligible and still encouraged to apply. Applicants should design proposals that can be completed in 2 years (24 months) or less and project periods should start approximately 2 to 6 months after the expected November 2026 award notification date to allow for the contracting process. Proposals are strongly encouraged to provide non-Federal matching contributions (both cash and in-kind), but there is no formal matching requirement for proposals under this RFP.

GEOGRAPHIC FOCUS

While projects need not take place within the range of right whales, competitive projects need to demonstrate a substantial likelihood of enhancing vessels' ability to avoid striking large whales, especially right whales, now or in the future or advancing our understanding of ways to reduce vessel strikes of right whales. In cases where engineering, design, or testing of technology is occurring in other regions outside of this range, those proposals must demonstrate substantial engagement with Atlantic coast stakeholders and consideration of right whale characteristics, behavior, and habitat use. A small subset of funding is available for work in the Gulf of America as discussed at the end of the Program Priorities section below.

PROGRAM PRIORITIES

Proposals should address one or more of the program priorities listed below. All proposals should outline the conservation benefits of the project relating to the main goal of promoting the development and adoption of technologies or other innovations that address the likelihood of vessels colliding with right whales and large whale species. Projects focused on innovations relevant to high-risk vessel types (e.g. large ships, passenger ferries, recreational yachts, work boats) and high-speed operations will be prioritized. Further, while projects may have components or elements that include mariner outreach, education, or broad information sharing, projects focused solely on these aspects will not be prioritized, apart from specific circumstances listed later in the priorities section for the Gulf of America. Work may be conducted on analogous species or surrogate materials, but such proposals should clearly justify the value of that work to inform right whale conservation. The majority of this funding will go to priorities 1 and 2 described below. This RFP for the Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund program has the following priorities:

1) Research to develop, test, or deploy technologies that aid real-time detection of right whales and other large whales, especially for higher vessel speeds.
    a. Detection capability should be grounded in the specific needs and capability of an ocean user group or groups. The technology should operate at a spatial scale, speed, or under environmental conditions that are relevant to the speed, maneuverability, and operating conditions of the target vessels and can inform decision making by the vessel operator or serve as a platform to collect data directly useful to decision making by other vessel operators.
2) Investigations that inform vessel strike avoidance or reduce strike severity including:
    a. Assessment of data from vessels that have experienced a strike event.
    b. Potential vessel engineering and design changes that could reduce the severity of strikes.
    c. Measures to help whales more easily detect and avoid oncoming vessel traffic.
    d. Modeling and analysis focused on supporting the evaluation of effectiveness or risk reduction capabilities of strike avoidance innovations.
    e. Improving understanding of dynamics and distribution of non-AIS equipped, high speed vessels.
    f. Information on vessel operator response to the detection or notification of whales nearby and/or on the vessel's path of transit.

3) Advance understanding of whale behavior and biology that is particularly relevant to informing detection technology or evaluation of such technology, that may aid in reducing vessels strikes. Specific proposals of interest include:
    a. Efforts to assemble and make available existing records on large whale blow rates and size (e.g. height), call rates, and dive profiles capturing seasonal, regional, and demographic differences that could inform the availability of whales for detection or vulnerability to strikes.
    b. Research detailing fine-scale whale movements, vocalizations, orientation, and reactions (if any) to nearby (e.g. < 100 yards) vessel traffic, including vessel tracks and operational details.

    Note: Proposals for funding under this priority must show a strong, direct, and applied connection to reducing vessel strikes. Proposals for basic whale behavior and biology research that may only tangentially inform vessel strike reduction measures will not be considered for funding.

4) Development of machine learning-based models to enable detection of whales in very-high-resolution satellite imagery. Approaches should be open-source Python for Vantor (formerly Maxar) WorldView imagery and recognize the challenge of model development with limited availability of training data.

5) Research to develop innovative satellite tracking tags for large whales, with a focus on the following tag characteristics:
    a. Advanced and minimally invasive attachment techniques including attaching to callosities in a similar manner to cyamids (whale lice) or using marine adhesives.
    b. Long term attachment, battery life, and communication capability, seeking 1 year or longer deployments.

c. Deployable by drone or other reliable minimally invasive methods,
Note: Tagging innovation proposals do not need to involve physical tagging of large whales and may include lab testing, using models, cadavers, etc. The focus of this priority is advancing the development of tagging technology, not operationally deploying tags for tracking.

Additional Priority
NFWF has a smaller amount of funding specifically focused on the vessel strike avoidance priorities listed previously in this section for use in the Gulf of America. For this geography only, NFWF will also consider stakeholder awareness and communication proposals (*e.g.* mariner and industry outreach, education, or broad information sharing systems) around large whale use of the Gulf and vessel strike avoidance innovations.

Stakeholder Impact and Engagement: When possible and where applicable, projects should be developed with mariner input and co-design processes to secure maximum benefits for these constituencies and the sustainability of outcomes post-grant. Many ocean user groups overlap with right whale habitat and the habitat of other large whales. Proposals should demonstrate the groups that they intend to engage or have engaged regarding their solution to ensure its use and impact.

PROJECT METRICS

To better gauge progress on individual grants and to ensure greater consistency of project data provided by multiple grants, the Vessel Strike Avoidance Fund has a list of metrics that will be available in Easygrants for applicants to choose from for future reporting. We ask that applicants select only the most relevant metrics from this list for their project (all possible proposal metrics are shown in the table below). If you think an applicable metric has not been provided, please contact Gray Redding *(gray.redding@nfwf.org)* to discuss acceptable alternatives.

A variety of tracking metrics are provided below for applicants to use in their proposals. All metrics are potentially appropriate for projects under this RFP. Some key metrics of interest are the number of technologies developed, tested, or implemented, the number of mariners implementing a new practice or technology, and the number of vessels engaged in right whale vessel strike avoidance or monitoring programs.

Project Activity	Recommended Metric	Additional Guidance
CAPACITY		
Train and build mariners' skills in and knowledge of using technology to avoid vessel strike.	*Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people with knowledge*	*Enter the number of people demonstrating a minimum level of knowledge, attitudes, or skills necessary to use technology relevant to vessel strike reduction now or in future implementations. In the "Notes" section please describe the minimum skill level and how stakeholders demonstrate they have reached it.*

Grow organizations to increase capacity for vessel strike avoidance technology development, testing, and future implementation.	*Building institutional capacity - # FTEs with sufficient training*	*Enter the number of staff or full-time equivalents with sufficient training and skills engaged in technology testing, training, or manufacturing. Provide the skills that the staff will have in the "Notes" section.*
TECHNOLOGY USE AND ADOPTION		
Engage vessels in a right whale vessel strike avoidance technology or monitoring program	*Monitoring - # vessels in monitoring program*	*Enter the number of vessels engaged in monitoring programs with examples being equipping a vessel with new technology, engaging a vessel with a communication network, or otherwise sharing or using data on right whale presence. In the "Notes," please specify the type of program.*
Help vessel captains or other stakeholders implement a new practice or other behavioral change.	*Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people with changed behavior*	*Enter the number of people reached that have demonstrated a minimum threshold of behavior change. Examples of this change could be adoption of new technology or practice. This metric should only be chosen if the project has clear methods to define and measure behavior change, which should be described in the "Notes" section.*
DEVELOPMENT AND ENGINEERING		
Develop a formal plan to implement or trial a technology or avoidance program.	*Management or Governance Planning - # plans developed*	*Specify the number of plans developed with input from multiple stakeholders. Plans should identify monitoring or system improvement objectives. Examples of types of plans may include an implementation plan or operations plan for a technology trial, technology interoperability plan, data*

		management plan, software design document, etc.
Develop a tool or technique for detection, avoidance, communication, or other use.	*Tool development for decision-making - # tools developed*	*Enter the number of tools developed and specify the type of tool(s) in the "Notes" section. Developing a tool would mean early conceptualization and creation.*
Test a tool or technique for detection, avoidance, communication, or other use.	*Tool development for decision-making - # tools/techniques tested*	*Enter the number of tools tested and specify the type of tool(s) in the "Notes" section. Testing a tool would represent the pilot stage in real world conditions.*
Implement a tool or technique for detection, avoidance, communication, or other use.	*Tool development for decision-making -# tools/techniques implemented*	*Enter the number of tools implemented and specify the type of tool(s) in the "Notes" section. Implementing a tool would occur through at-scale deployment of the tool.*
OUTREACH		
Reach vessel captains or other stakeholders in a project through education, assistance, or other means. *Note: As described in Program Priorities, outreach can be an element of projects but not the main focus in the majority of cases.*	*Outreach/ Education/ Technical Assistance - # people reached*	*State the number of people reached by outreach, training, or technical assistance activities. Use the "Notes" section to identify the type of outreach or assistance, and level of engagement had with people reached.*
PARTNERSHIPS		
Engage government agencies, non-governmental organizations, ocean user groups, and other stakeholder groups in testing or implementing vessel strike avoidance innovations.	*Capacity, Outreach, Incentives- # of organizations contributing to goals*	*Enter the number of organizations participating in the project. In the "Notes" section, please briefly list the entities, the type of entity (ocean user group, fishing association, local, state, or federal government, NGO, for-profit business, etc.) and how they are participating.*

ELIGIBILITY

Eligible and Ineligible Entities

- Eligible applicants include relevant state government agencies, local governments, regional governments, Tribal Governments and Organizations, educational institutions, non-profit 501(c) organizations, commercial (for-profit) organizations, and international organizations.
- Ineligible applicants include unincorporated individuals. Federal government entities are also ineligible.
- For-profit applicants: please note that this is a request for grant proposals, not a procurement of goods and services; see the Budget section below for specific cost considerations.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

All proposals will be screened for relevance, accuracy, completeness and compliance with NFWF and funding source policies. Proposals will then be evaluated based on the extent to which they meet the following criteria.

Conservation Outcomes	Budget	Technical
• Alignment with program goals and priorities • Quantifiable performance metrics • Appropriate monitoring of activities and outcomes • Partnership & community engagement • Project long-term sustainability	• Allowable and reasonable costs • Matching contributions • Cost effectiveness	• Technically sound and feasible • Logical and achievable work plan and timeline • Engages technical experts • Accurate spatial data • Sound compliance approach (permits, NEPA, QAQC) • Past grantee success • Transferable

Program Goals and Priorities – Project contributes to the Program's overall species conservation goals related to engaging mariners in the development and use of technology or other innovations that can reduce the threat of vessel strike to large whales, especially the right whale, and has specific, quantifiable performance metrics to evaluate project success. Project addresses one or more of the program priorities.

Technical Merit – Project is technically sound and feasible, and the proposal sets forth a clear, logical and achievable work plan and timeline. Proposal includes sufficient technical detail for reviewers of various backgrounds to assess and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed technology or approach. Project engages appropriate technical experts throughout project planning, design, and implementation to ensure activities are technically sound and feasible. Where engineering and technical development are occurring, proposal has appropriately integrated open-source concepts and interoperability into their development process to ensure public benefit from innovations.

Community Impact and Engagement – The applicant organization partners and engages collaboratively with local community members, leaders, and community-based organizations, including coastal communities and other relevant stakeholders to develop and implement the proposed project. Projects that directly engage and work with mariners are strongly encouraged and

proposals including sufficient specificity to evaluate this will be more competitive during application review. This ensures long-term sustainability and success of the project and community acceptance of innovations. Proposals should describe the community characteristics of the project area, identify any communities impacted, describe outreach and community engagement activities and how those will be monitored and measured. Use data to support descriptions and submit letters of support from community partners and/or collaborators demonstrating their commitment to the project and engagement in project activities as proposed.

Budget – Costs are allowable, reasonable and budgeted in accordance with NFWF's Budget Instructions cost categories. Federally-funded projects must be in compliance with OMB Uniform Guidance as applicable. This funding opportunity will award grants of federal financial assistance funds; applicants must be able to comply with the OMB Uniform Guidance (2 CFR 200). While for-profit entities are eligible applicants, charges to a potential award may include actual costs only; recipients may not apply loaded rates or realize profit from an award of federal financial assistance funds.

Matching Contributions – Matching Contributions consist of cash, contributed goods and services, volunteer hours, and/or property raised and spent for the Project during the Period of Performance. Larger match ratios and matching fund contributions from a range of partners are encouraged and will be more competitive during application review.

Cost-Effectiveness – Cost-effectiveness analysis identifies the most economically efficient way to meet project objectives. Project includes a cost-effective budget that balances performance risk and efficient use of funds. Cost-effectiveness evaluation includes, but is not limited to, an assessment of effective direct/indirect costs across all categories in the proposed budget according to the type, size and duration of project and project objectives. Project budgets will be compared to similar projects to ensure proposed costs across all budget categories are reasonable for the activities being performed and the outcomes proposed.

Transferability – Project has potential and plan to transfer lessons learned to other communities and/or to be integrated into government programs and policies. This includes clear discussion of the anticipated capabilities and limitations of the technology in different conditions experienced by relevant user groups. Plans are also included for technology to be interoperable with other technologies ensuring transferability across the region.

Monitoring – Project includes a plan for monitoring progress during and after the proposed project period to track project success and adaptively address new challenges and opportunities as they arise. In tracking progress and success of a technology, the plan should address measures like capability, reliability, and accuracy among other quantitative or qualitative measures.

Past Success – Applicant has a proven track record of success in implementing conservation practices with specific, measurable results.

Spatial Data – Project spatial data submitted to NFWF's online mapping tool accurately represent the location(s) of conservation activity(ies) at the time of proposal submission. Successful projects

will be required to submit improved spatial data for each conservation activity within the period of performance as necessary.

OTHER

Ineligible Uses of Grant Funds

- NFWF funds and matching contributions are strictly prohibited from being used for a number of reasons to include, for example, political advocacy, fundraising, lobbying, litigation, terrorist activities, or in violation of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. See OMB Uniform Guidance for additional information.
- Equipment: Applicants are encouraged to rent equipment where possible and cost-effective or use matching funds to make those purchases. NFWF acknowledges, however, that some projects may only be completed using NFWF funds to procure equipment. If this applies to your project, please contact the program staff listed in this RFP to discuss options.
- Federal funds and matching contributions may not be used to procure or obtain equipment, services, or systems (including entering into or renewing a contract) that uses telecommunications equipment or services produced by Huawei Technologies Company or ZTE Corporation (or any subsidiary or affiliate of such entities) as a substantial or essential component, or as critical technology of any system. Refer to Public Law 115-232, section 889 for additional information.
- Pursuant to the American Security Drone Act (ASDA), effective December 22, 2025, applicants proposing activities funded in whole or in part with federal funds may not use, operate, or purchase any drone or uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) included on the Covered Foreign Entities (CFE) List. This prohibition applies to both new purchases and continued use of existing UAS, including certain widely used commercial platforms, such as DJI and Autel. Applicants are responsible for ensuring that all proposed and existing UAS used in connection with federally funded activities comply with applicable federal law and are not included on the CFE List. Noncompliance may affect eligibility for funding.
- NFWF funds may not be used to support ongoing efforts to comply with legal requirements, including permit conditions, mitigation and settlement agreements. However, grant funds may be used to support projects that enhance or improve upon existing baseline compliance efforts.

Environmental Services – NFWF funds projects in pursuit of its mission to sustain, restore and enhance the nation's fish, wildlife, plants and habitats for current and future generations. NFWF recognizes that some benefits from projects may be of value with regards to credits on an environmental services market (such as a carbon credit market). NFWF does not participate in, facilitate, or manage an environmental services market nor does NFWF assert any claim on such credits.

Intellectual Property – Intellectual property created using NFWF awards may be copyrighted or otherwise legally protected by award recipients. NFWF may reserve the right to use, publish, and copy materials created under awards, including posting such material on NFWF's website and featuring it in publications. NFWF may use project metrics and spatial data from awards to estimate societal benefits that result and to report these results to funding partners. These may include but are

not limited to: habitat and species response, species connectivity, water quality, water quantity, risk of detrimental events (e.g., wildfire, floods), and carbon accounting (e.g., sequestration, avoided emissions).

Procurement – If the applicant chooses to specifically identify proposed Contractor(s) for Services, an award by NFWF to the applicant does not constitute NFWF's express written authorization for the applicant to procure such specific services noncompetitively. When procuring goods and services, NFWF recipients must follow documented procurement procedures which reflect applicable laws and regulations.

Publicity and Acknowledgement of Support – Award recipients will be required to grant NFWF the right and authority to publicize the project and NFWF's financial support for the grant in press releases, publications and other public communications. Recipients may also be asked by NFWF to provide high-resolution (minimum 300 dpi) photographs depicting the project.

Receiving Award Funds – Award payments are primarily reimbursable. Projects may request funds for reimbursement at any time after completing a signed agreement with NFWF. A request of an advance of funds must be due to an imminent need of expenditure and must detail how the funds will be used and provide justification and a timeline for expected disbursement of these funds. Requests for monthly advances will not be considered.

Compliance Requirements – Projects selected may be subject to requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act (state and federal), and National Historic Preservation Act. Documentation of compliance with these regulations must be approved prior to initiating activities that disturb or alter habitat or other features of the project site(s). Applicants should budget time and resources to obtain the needed approvals. As may be applicable, successful applicants may be required to comply with additional Federal, state or local requirements and obtain all necessary permits and clearances.

Quality Assurance – If a project involves significant monitoring, data collection or data use, grantees must comply with NOAA's Data Sharing Policy for all environmental data. Applicants should budget time and resources to complete these tasks.

Permits – Successful applicants will be required to provide sufficient documentation that the project expects to receive or has received all necessary permits and clearances to comply with any Federal, state or local requirements. Where projects involve work in the waters of the United States and potentially interact with marine mammals, NFWF strongly encourages applicants to consider permit needs related to the Marine Mammal Protection Act or Endangered Species Act, including potential discussion with NOAA prior to submitting their proposal.

HOW TO APPLY

All application materials must be submitted online through National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Easygrants system.

1. Go to easygrants.nfwf.org to register in our Easygrants online system. New users to the system will be prompted to register before starting the application (if you already are a registered user, use your existing login). Enter your applicant information. Please disable the pop-up blocker on your internet browser prior to beginning the application process.

2. Once on your homepage, click the "Apply for Funding" button and select this RFP's "Funding Opportunity" from the list of options.

3. Follow the instructions in Easygrants to complete your application. Once an application has been started, it may be saved and returned to at a later time for completion and submission.

APPLICATION ASSISTANCE

A *Tip Sheet* is available for quick reference while you are working through your application. This document can be downloaded here.

Additional information to support the application process can be accessed on the NFWF website's Applicant Information page.

For more information or questions about this RFP, please contact:
Gray Redding
Gray.Redding@nfwf.org

For issues or assistance with our online Easygrants system, please contact:
Easygrants Helpdesk
Email: Easygrants@nfwf.org
Voicemail: 202-595-2497
Hours: 9:00 am to 5:00 pm ET, Monday-Friday.
Include: your name, proposal ID #, e-mail address, phone number, program you are applying to, and a description of the issue.