



# VISITOR INDUSTRY TASK FORCE 2.0 (VITF) AGENDA

April 16, 2026 at 5:30 PM

Assembly Chambers/Zoom Webinar

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<https://juneau.zoom.us/j/83826098583> or call 1 (669) 444-9171 Webinar ID: 838 2609 8583

**A. CALL TO ORDER/ROLL CALL**

**B. LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** We would like to acknowledge that the City and Borough of Juneau is on Tlingit land and wish to honor the indigenous people of this land. For more than ten thousand years, Alaska Native people have been and continue to be integral to the well-being of our community. We are grateful to be in this place, a part of this community, and to honor the culture, traditions, and resilience of the Tlingit people. Gunalchéesh

**C. APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

**D. APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

**1. 2026-03-19 VITF Minutes - Draft**

**E. AGENDA TOPICS**

**1. Whale Watching Discussion and Policy Options**

- i. Introductions & Overview
- ii. Discussion

**F. COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS**

**G. NEXT MEETING DATE** Thursday, April 23, 2026 @ 5:30pm

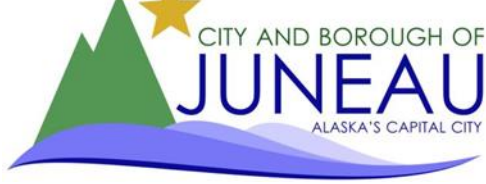
**H. SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

**1. VITF Whale Watch Memo 4-16-2026 w/ Updated Information**

**2. Asst. City Attorney Lynch Notes on Whale Watching**

**I. ADJOURNMENT**

ADA accommodations available upon request: contact the Clerk's Office (907)586-5278 or [city.clerk@juneau.gov](mailto:city.clerk@juneau.gov) at least 36 hours prior to a meeting, to request ADA arrangements.



## VITF 2.0 – MEETING MINUTES

March 19, 2026 at 5:30 PM  
Assembly Chambers & Zoom

<https://juneau.zoom.us/j/83826098583> or call 1 (669) 444-9171 Webinar ID: 838 2609 8583

### A. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 5:30 pm by Kirby Day

### B. ROLL CALL

Task Force Members Present: Ella Adkison (via Zoom); Neil Steininger; Meilani Schijvens; Kirby Day; Kirsa Hughes-Skandijs; Matt Catterson; Ren Scott (via Zoom); Jeremy Timothy, Sarah Lowell, Shem Sooter

Task Force Members Absent:

Staff Members Present: Alexandra Pierce, Visitor Industry Director (via Zoom); Phil Huebschen, Engagement Specialist

Additional Speakers Present: Laura Buchheit, US Forest Service; Andres Delgado, Juneau International Airport; Nicole Lynch, CBJ Law; Jon Percy, FAA (via Zoom)

### C. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Agenda approved

### D. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Minutes amended to show Mr. Sooters presence at the March 19 meeting.

### E. AGENDA TOPICS

#### a. Flightseeing Discussion and Policy Options

##### i) Continued discussion

Topics from last meeting were further explored and discussed by VITF members and guest speakers.

##### ii) Recommendations

The following topics were agreed upon for future recommendation considerations. No formal action was taken:

1. Encourage flight operators to consolidate departures when & where appropriate.
2. Pursue a noise study examining noise differentials between H130 helicopters and other models.

## VITF 2.0 – MEETING MINUTES

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3. Explore alternative heliports and refresh the 2001 study.
4. Pursue a study examining number of noise complaints to TBMP versus area of complaint. Explore if complaints are received from a few specific individuals, or more broadly distributed across affected neighborhoods/areas.
5. Encourage TBMP administrators to retrieve as much detail as possible in reported noise concerns.

### **F. COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS**

There were no additional comments or questions.

### **G. MEETING SCHEDULE CHANGES/NEXT MEETING DATE**

Next meeting date – April 16, 2026 at 5:30pm.

### **H. SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

There was no discussion of supplemental materials.

### **I. ADJOURNMENT**

*The meeting was adjourned at 6:37 pm*

## Memorandum

**To:** Visitor Industry Task Force

**From:** Alexandra Pierce, Visitor Industry Director

**Date:** April 7, 2026

**Re:** Whale Watching Overview

### Purpose

This memo provides an overview of the whale watching industry in Juneau. Unlike the helicopter industry, the whale watch industry has not been extensively studied. Currently, the industry operates based on U.S. Coast Guard and NOAA regulations, as well as TBMP and the voluntary [Whale SENSE](#) program.

### Industry Overview

Whale watching is one of the cornerstone visitor experiences in Juneau, centered primarily on sightings of humpback whales in Auke Bay, Favorite Channel, Stephens Passage, and surrounding waters. Operators range from large, multi-vessel companies serving cruise ship passengers to smaller, independent charter operators. Vessels vary in size from high-capacity catamarans to smaller, more nimble boats offering more intimate wildlife experiences. The industry supports a significant number of seasonal jobs and contributes materially to the local economy through direct tour sales and indirect visitor spending.

One of the major challenges is that not all whale watch operators use CBJ dock facilities. Allan Marine, by far the largest operator, has its own facility whereas smaller operators use Fisherman's Bend with the remaining boats using Statter Harbor. There are an estimated 75 whale watch boats in Juneau according to NOAA. An additional complication is that Goldbelt has purchased whale watch boats and is planning to operate maritime tours from the proposed Goldbelt Aani development.

The key issues around whale watching are the number of boats, wake disturbances, and crowding in the water and in Statter Harbor. CBJ's [2024 Juneau Community Tourism Survey](#) asked about whale watching:

**Table 27. Are you concerned about Juneau's whale watch industry? (%)**

n=501	% of Total
Yes	61
No	35
Don't know	4

**Table 28. What are your main concerns? (%)**  
 Base: Concerned about Juneau’s whale watch industry  
 Multiple responses allowed

n=305	% of Base
Impacts to whales/wildlife	79
Number of boats on the water	64
Number of boats at harbor	27
Wakes	15
Noise	11
Other*	12
Don't know	3

\*A list of “other” responses can be found in the Appendix.

**April 16 Meeting Overview**

Once again, the VITF will hear from a panel regarding current conditions, operations, and challenges associated with whale watching. Because there are fewer resources currently available, staff is committed to getting any additional information that arises during the panel discussion. Panelists include:

Suzie Teerlink, NOAA: Suzie is a PhD. Biologist with NOAA and administered the Whale Sense program for many years.

Heidi Pearson, University of Alaska: Heidi leads whale research for the university, including the Whale HEALTH study.

Matt Creswell, Docks & Harbors: As CBJ Harbormaster, Matt works directly with the operators that use Statter Harbor.

Nicole Lynch, CBJ Law: You met CBJ Assistant Municipal Attorney Nicole at the last meeting. We have asked her to research regulatory options for whale watching.

Serene Hutchison, Juneau Tours and Southeast Alaska Whale Watch Association: Serene will be joining us in her role as chair of SEAWWA.

Jayleen Bydlon, Jayleen’s Alaska: Jaylene will represent the small boat whale watch operators.

## Jurisdictional Authorities

### Federal Agencies

- **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA Fisheries)**  
NOAA enforces the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), which governs interactions with marine mammals, including humpback whales. [Regulations include minimum approach distances and prohibitions on harassment.](#) NOAA also leads education and outreach efforts and until recently, administered the Whale SENSE program in partnership with other organizations. Due to recent federal cuts, NOAA is not currently devoting staff time to Whale SENSE, but operators in SEAWWA have committed to continue abiding by the guidelines.
- **United States Coast Guard (USCG)**  
The Coast Guard oversees vessel safety, navigation rules, and maritime traffic management. This includes ensuring that commercial operators comply with licensing, safety equipment, and operational standards. The Coast Guard does not enforce the MMPA.

### Local Government

- **City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ)**  
CBJ does not regulate whale interactions directly but influences the industry through dock management, permitting, and broader tourism policy. While other American whale watch ports regulate the industry through dock facilities, Juneau is challenged by a mix of public and private facilities currently hosting the whale watch fleet.

### Regulatory Framework

The primary enforceable protections for whales come from the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), implemented by NOAA. Key provisions include:

- Minimum approach distances (100 yards for humpback whales in Alaska)
- Speed and course restrictions to avoid disturbance
- Prohibitions on feeding, pursuing, or otherwise harassing marine mammals

These rules apply to all vessels, including commercial operators and private boaters.

### Key Considerations for Policy Discussion

- **High Concentration of Activity:** Juneau's whale watching grounds can experience high vessel density during peak cruise days, raising concerns about cumulative impacts on whale behavior.

- **Voluntary vs. Regulatory Balance:** Existing voluntary programs (TBMP and Whale SENSE) are widely supported and effective, but do not solve the problem of the number of boats on the water and the persistent issues of wake and crowding.
- **Enforcement Limitations:** Federal agencies have limited on-the-water enforcement capacity, making industry compliance and self-regulation critical.
- **Visitor Education:** Continued emphasis on educating visitors about responsible wildlife viewing can reinforce industry standards and expectations.
- **Data and Monitoring:** Ongoing scientific research and local observation are essential to understanding long-term impacts and informing adaptive management.

Juneau's whale watching industry is a vital component of the visitor economy and a globally recognized wildlife experience. Its management relies on a combination of federal regulation, state and local coordination, and strong voluntary stewardship programs. The continued success of this model will depend on maintaining high compliance, adapting to changing conditions, and ensuring that both ecological sustainability and community values are upheld.

Committee members are encouraged to watch the video of [Suzie Teerlink's presentation to the Committee of the Whole from September 2023](#). Suzie's presentation starts at 47:30. There is a presentation from the whale watch industry immediately before.

Information for review:

[TBMP guidelines \(page 15\) and call logs regarding the whale watch industry](#)

[Whale Sense program and guidelines](#)

[Marine Mammal Protection Act](#)



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## Memorandum

**To:** Visitor Industry Task Force

**From:** Alexandra Pierce, Visitor Industry Director

**Date:** April 17, 2026

**Re:** Whale Watching Overview

**UPDATE:** This is the same memo from last meeting with some additions at the end, and an attachment of Nicole Lynch's notes on legal options.

### Purpose

This memo provides an overview of the whale watching industry in Juneau. Unlike the helicopter industry, the whale watch industry has not been extensively studied. Currently, the industry operates based on U.S. Coast Guard and NOAA regulations, as well as TBMP and the voluntary [Whale SENSE](#) program.

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[Marine Mammal Protection Act](#)

[Pacific Whale Watch Association](#)

[NOAA West Coast Whale Watching – Whale Wise](#)

**Attachment A: Nicole Lynch Legal Notes**

## Whale Watching

What other states are doing: often acting in concert with or enforcing federal regulations under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA).

### Washington State

- Washington State has laws protecting southern resident orcas, that include specific duties of commercial whale watching vessels. <https://wdfw.wa.gov/licenses/commercial/whale-watching>
  - Annual license for commercial whale watching businesses and operators
  - Annual required training
  - Rules and requirements for commercial whale watching and paddle tours
    - Laws include areas closed to motorized commercial vessels;
    - max of three motorized commercial whale watching vessels at a time w/in ½ nautical mile of southern resident orcas;
    - operators may not enter the vicinity of groups containing a calf under one year or a whale designated sick or vulnerable by emergency rule;
    - no-go zones in key foraging areas
    - vessels must travel at 7-knots or less within 1 kl.

The result of a task force of fifty representatives from different sectors, including local, state, federal, and Tribal governments; the Washington State Legislature; the private sector; nonprofit organizations; and the government of Canada. <https://orca.wa.gov/about/task-force/>

Three workgroups were created, representing each major threat to killer whales: vessels, contaminants, and prey. Each group consisted of subject matter experts and stakeholders to support the task force with the best available science and to analyze potential actions.

- While WA's regulations are specific to WA state waters, the Pacific Whale Watch Association (.com) often applies these guidelines to neighboring waters in British Columbia as well.
  - The PWWA is similar to our TBMP – a voluntary organization that developed guidelines for responsible ecotourism practices since 1994.
    - Viewing distance limitations
    - Reduced speeds within 1 kl. (.62 ml) around all whales in WA & BC.
    - Add'l guidelines: vessel count monitoring, data collection and sharing, restricted communication protocols (to exclude those not in the program).

### Hawaii

- Hawaii has strict regulations for humpback whales during the breeding season (Nov-May) within the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. As well as approach regulations within 200 nautical miles from shore.
- Hawaii partners with the NOAA through joint enforcement
- Hawaii State Laws do protect endangered, threatened, and indigenous species, including humpback whales.

## Whale Watching

### CBJ Jurisdiction

- Feds have authority beyond 3 (or 12) nautical miles from shore, depending on the law. MMPA is 3 nm. Overlap between state and feds between 3 and 12 miles.
- State of Alaska holds primary management authority over waters and wildlife. AK CONST Art. 8, § 3. Beyond the mean lower low tide line (baseline) out to federal jurisdiction at either 3 or 12 nautical miles from shore.
- CBJ has authority over the shore out to the baseline – mean lower low tide line, and tidelands that have been conveyed to it. CBJ may also regulate its wharves, harbors, and other marine facilities outside its boundaries. AS 29.35.020.

### What CBJ can do:

- a permit for commercial whale watching vessel use of Statter Harbor;
- a commercial whale watching business license;
  - city issued license to operate a commercial whale watching business in the CBJ.
- a commercial whale watching operator license;
  - license to operate a commercial vessel on behalf of a commercial whale watching business.
- limiting the number of dock spaces available to commercial vessels;
- developing a numbering scheme for the whale boats and putting the TBMP phone number in large print on the sides;
- limit the number of commercial whale watching vessels allowed with a limited entry type regulatory option which would require buying out boats.
- Work with the State and Federal government to create complementary laws and joint enforcement, along with other coastal communities.
  - This could include stricter regulations for a specific region, such as approach distances in Stephens Passage and Favorite Channel; no-go zones which are transit only by day of the week or area.
- Increase dock fees related to commercial whale watching vessels.
- Establish a local “whale sense” program – could be in conjunction with other methods.
- Down days, where no whale watching is allowed (not sure how this could be done)
- using permit or license fees to fund “whale rangers” to have a presence on the water and help scatter boat traffic if there are too many boats around a whale, etc.
  - While the waters are the jurisdiction of the state and federal government if those agencies are willing to let CBJ assist in monitoring it may be a possibility.
- Regular monitoring of whales, behavior and health
- AIS requirement for licensees/permittees
- moving the speed buoy so the boats need to slow down further from the harbor.