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**NOAA Fisheries Seeks Comment on Proposal To Protect Turtles
in Chesapeake Bay by Restricting Pound Net Devices in the Spring**

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is seeking comment on a proposal to restrict the springtime use of a device that directs fish into traps known as pound nets. The large mesh and certain types of leaders used in the device unintentionally entangle and drown endangered sea turtles in Virginia waters of the Chesapeake Bay during their spring migration. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is a part of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The proposal will affect 11 fishermen fishing in approximately 24 pound net sites in Virginia waters. Those fishermen can continue to use pound nets as long as the leaders have mesh smaller than 12 inches and do not have stringers. Pound net fisheries in the Chesapeake Bay target bait fish, croaker, menhaden, mackerel and other fish species.

Under the proposed rule, fishermen would not be able to use pound net leaders from May 8 through June 30, with a mesh of 12 inches or greater, or pound net leaders with stringers (vertical lines on the leader).

A pound net is a trap for catching fish, consisting of a system of nets staked upright in the water and a rectangular enclosure or pound from which escape is impossible. Sea turtles can become entangled in the leaders that direct fish into the pound nets.

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Sea turtles migrate north along the mid-Atlantic coast in the spring as water temperatures rise. During May and June when turtles migrate into Virginia waters of Chesapeake Bay, it is increasingly common to find dead turtles. During the spring of 2000 and 2001, a number of live and dead sea turtles in pound net leaders were documented along the Virginia shoreline. The Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network documented 265 dead turtles on Virginia beaches in 2001.

All sea turtles in U.S. waters are classified as either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The number of dead sea turtles found dead in May and June on Virginia beaches between 1995 and 2001 were threatened loggerheads (958), or endangered Kemp's ridleys (59), leatherbacks (17), green turtles (1) and 32 unidentified. The majority of the dead turtles were juveniles.

During the weeks when the rule would be in effect, NOAA Fisheries will continue to monitor active pound nets and leaders. If turtles are observed entangled in leaders with mesh smaller than 12 inches, the agency may impose additional restrictions. The proposed annual gear restrictions may also be extended for as much as 30 days after June 30.

A variety of other fisheries operate in the spring in the Virginia waters of Chesapeake Bay and in nearby ocean waters. NOAA Fisheries has been studying and will continue to study these other fisheries to determine whether they are contributing to sea turtle mortality in May and June.

Comments on the proposal will be accepted until 5 p.m., eastern standard time, on April 15, 2002. Written comments on this action or requests for copies of the proposal should be addressed to the Assistant Regional Administrator for Protected Resources, NOAA Fisheries, One Blackburn Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930, or by fax to 978 281 9394.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>.