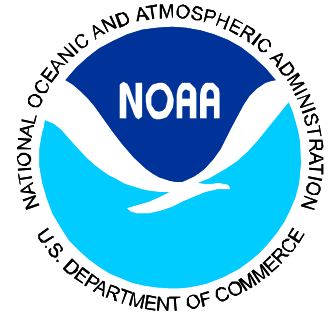


NOAA Fisheries
Southwest Region
501 West Ocean Blvd
Long Beach, CA 90802
562.980.4006



News Release

Contact: Jim Milbury
(562) 980-4006
Tim Price
(562) 980-4029

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 16, 2003

NOAA Fisheries issues regulation to protect loggerhead sea turtles

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today issued a final rule to protect loggerhead sea turtles that follow warmer El Niño currents into Southern California waters and risk becoming entangled in drift gillnet fishing operations. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the Commerce Department.

A tropical El Niño event will sometimes, but not always, cause the waters off Southern California to rise in temperature. Historical data indicates that if such a condition occurs loggerhead sea turtles may enter these warmer waters and risk entanglement where drift gillnetting occurs for thresher shark and swordfish.

Today's regulation will prohibit drift gillnet fishing in United States waters off Southern California east of 120 degrees W longitude (Point Conception to the Mexican border), for the months of June, July, and August during an El Niño year that raises sea surface temperatures off Southern California.

Criteria for determining if an El Niño is affecting conditions off Southern California will be gathered from published sea surface temperatures. When an El Niño causes water temperatures off Southern California to be higher than normal for two months preceding the months of June, July, or August, NOAA Fisheries will publish a notice describing the area closure for the fishery.

-more-

NOAA Fisheries issues regulation protecting loggerhead sea turtles off California

“We don’t want to restrict fishing unless it’s necessary,” stated Rod McInnis, NOAA Fisheries acting Southwest Regional Administrator, “but we also want to be able to have the ability to immediately protect loggerheads should they move into an area where they risk becoming caught in nets.”

In 2000, NOAA Fisheries determined in a biological opinion that the California/Oregon drift gillnet fishery would likely jeopardize the continued existence of loggerhead sea turtles if operations continued at the current level. NOAA Fisheries then developed a reasonable and prudent alternative (RPA) that included time and area closures to allow the fishery to continue and reduce loggerhead sea turtle entanglement by 71 percent.

Loggerhead sea turtles were listed as “threatened” under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1978 and its status has not changed. A “threatened” species is any species that is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. An “endangered” species is any species that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

The Federal Register implementing these new regulations may be found at: <http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/14mar20010800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2003/03-30919.htm>

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>.

The Commerce Department’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources. To learn more about NOAA, please visit <http://www.noaa.gov>.