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**NOAA SEEKS COMMENT ON PROPOSAL TO LESSEN FISHING IMPACTS ON SEA  
TURTLES & REOPEN GRAND BANKS TO U.S. PELAGIC LONGLINE FLEET**

The conclusion of a three-year experiment in the Grand Banks and recent estimates of sea turtle bycatch (unintentional catch) in the Atlantic pelagic longline fishery have prompted the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) to propose mandatory changes in fishing practice for the fleet. Under the proposal, turtle takes would be dramatically reduced, and U.S. fishermen would regain access to prime swordfish fishing grounds in the Grand Banks. NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Sea turtles are threatened or endangered with extinction as a result of many human-related activities, including the incidental capture in fisheries worldwide. NOAA Fisheries is responsible for overseeing the conservation and recovery of these species. A critical step towards recovering sea turtles is reducing bycatch in the pelagic longline fishery.

"We are concerned that the incidental take of sea turtles last year exceeded anticipated levels. One possible reason for the increase in take is that certain participants in the longline fleet may have switched from circle to 'J' style hooks," said Dr. Rebecca Lent, deputy director of the National Marine Fisheries Service. "But the good news is that a number of longline fishermen want to protect sea turtles and have worked along side us over the past few years to develop new turtle-friendly fishing methods and gear technologies."

The agency is proposing changes to hooks and bait that would help longliners decrease the catch of sea turtles by up to 90 percent. The proposal calls on fishermen to switch from the traditional "J" style hook to large circle hooks. Fishermen would be able to use either 18/0 circle hooks with an offset not to exceed 10 degrees and mackerel bait, or 18/0 non-offset circle hooks and squid bait.

All pelagic longline vessels would further be required to carry certain types of equipment and utilize handling protocols to facilitate the safe release of turtles that couldn't avoid capture. See the attached fact sheet for more information on what type of gear would be required.

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NOAA Fisheries prohibited the American pelagic longline fishery from operating in the Grand Banks in 2001 because of turtle catches in that area. Between 2001 and 2003, the agency conducted cooperative research with the industry to determine which hook and bait treatments successfully avoided sea turtles and to develop gear technology that would aid in safe turtle handling and release (see [www.nmfs.noaa.gov/mediacenter/turtles](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/mediacenter/turtles) for more background on the experiments).

The experiment concluded that the best reduction rate for loggerhead and leatherback sea turtles catches was achieved using an 18/0 circle hook with specific bait. For loggerheads, the greatest reduction was 91 percent, using mackerel bait and an offset circle hook. For leatherbacks, the greatest reduction was 75 percent, using squid and a non-offset circle hook. Mackerel in combination with a non-offset hook was not tested because of the difficulty in baiting a circle hook with mackerel. Mackerel, when combined with offset circle hooks, yielded a 16 percent increase in swordfish catch, but did result in a significant loss in bigeye tuna catch. This increase in catch was apparent only in cooler waters. Bigeye tuna catch was increased 25 percent when squid and non-offset circle hooks were used.

The socio-economic impacts of the use of these new gear combinations will vary by region, and may be more severe for vessels fishing in warmer waters.

Based upon the successful results of the experiment, NOAA Fisheries proposes to remove the current prohibition on pelagic longline fishing in the Grand Banks, because the proposed hook and bait regulations are expected to significantly reduce sea turtle interactions throughout the fishery.

The public is invited to comment on the proposed regulations. Comments must be received by 5 p.m., eastern standard time, on March 15, 2004, and should be submitted to Christopher Rogers, Chief, Highly Migratory Species Management Division, NOAA Fisheries, 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910; faxed to 301-713-1917 or e-mailed to [0648AR80.PROPOSED@noaa.gov](mailto:0648AR80.PROPOSED@noaa.gov). Please include "0648-AR80" in the subject line. For more information, or copies of the Environmental Impact Statement, contact Russell Dunn at 727-570-5447.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

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.

On the Web:

NOAA - [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov)

NOAA Fisheries - [www.nmfs.noaa.gov](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov)

## **FACT SHEET: PROPOSED NEW, OR NEWLY-REVISED GEARS THAT WOULD BE MANDATORY FOR THE ATLANTIC PELAGIC LONGLINE FLEET**

- A) a long-handled line clipper or cutter;
- B) a long-handled dehooker for ingested hooks;
- C) a long-handled dehooker for external hooks;
- D) a long-handled device to pull an “inverted V”;
- E) a dipnet;
- F) a standard automobile tire;
- G) a short-handled dehooker for ingested hooks;
- H) a short-handled dehooker for external hooks;
- I) long-nose or needle-nose pliers;
- J) a bolt cutter;
- K) a monofilament line cutter;
- L) two different types of mouth openers and mouth gags (including either a block of hard wood, a set of three canine mouth gags, a set of two sturdy dog chew bones, a set of two rope loops covered with hose, a hank of rope, a set of 4 PVC splice couplings, or a large avian oral speculum).

Items A - D above are intended to be used for turtles that are not boated.

Items E - L above are intended to be used for turtles that are brought onboard.

The long-handled dehooker for ingested hooks required in Item B would also satisfy the requirement for Item C. If a six-foot (1.83 m) J-style dehooker is used for Item C, it would also satisfy the requirement for Item D.

Similarly, the short-handled dehooker for ingested hooks required for Item G would also satisfy the requirement for Item H.

NOAA Fisheries recommends, but has not proposed a requirement, that one type of mouth opener/mouth gag allow for hands-free operation of the dehooking device or other tool, after the mouth gag is in place. Only a canine mouth gag would satisfy this recommendation. Also, a “turtle tether” and a “turtle hoist” are recommended, but are not being proposed as requirements.

NOAA Fisheries is proposing minimum design standards for the above listed gear as well as an initial list of approved gear. NOAA Fisheries will examine and approve other devices, as they become available, if the devices also meet the design standards.