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NOAA steps up effort to address sea turtle mortality, seeks public input

As part of stepped-up efforts to address an increase in sea turtle strandings in the Gulf of Mexico, NOAA announced today it will explore new rules to reduce unintended catch and mortality of sea turtles in the southeastern shrimp fishery.

NOAA has documented an increase in sea turtle strandings in the northern Gulf, particularly throughout the Mississippi Sound area. Between January 1, 2011 and June 17, 2011, 379 sea turtle strandings have been reported along the Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana coastline. The majority of these strandings, 238 turtles, occurred in Mississippi. NOAA leads the National Stranding Network, and is actively monitoring trends and investigating the cause of the strandings.

Results of the necropsies done to date indicate many of the turtles likely drowned. The exact causes of all of the drownings and any contributing factors have yet to be determined.

NOAA has scheduled a series of public scoping meetings in mid-July in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and North Carolina, to solicit public comments to assist the agency in identifying issues and options for evaluation in a draft Environmental Impact Statement assessing the environmental impacts of potential regulatory approaches to reduce sea turtle mortality.

Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), required in most shrimp fisheries, are effective at reducing sea turtle drowning when properly installed and maintained. However, one type of gear, shrimp skimmer trawls, is currently allowed to operate without TEDs, and is instead regulated using tow time limits. The focus of this scoping process is to assess options to reduce sea turtle bycatch in the southeastern shrimp fishery.

In other efforts to increase compliance, NOAA's Fisheries Service gear experts and enforcement personnel have hosted several turtle excluder device workshops throughout the Gulf states to provide information and assistance to fishermen on federal requirements and proper installation of the devices. These experts have conducted numerous courtesy inspections on the docks and at-sea to improve compliance within the Gulf shrimp fishery.

NOAA is also actively working to improve compliance by conducting numerous enforcement patrols throughout the Gulf. "Violations of turtle excluder device requirements are being documented, and warnings and citations issued," said Alan Risenhoover, acting director of NOAA Fisheries' Office of Law Enforcement. "These actions, combined with increased visibility on the water and outreach on the docks, seem to be resulting in increased compliance."

The shrimp industry has also directly reached out to its members to provide information about turtle excluder device compliance. The Southern Shrimp Alliance scheduled more than a dozen meetings to inform their members that turtle excluder device compliance is a serious issue, stressing the importance of proper installation and maintenance.

Today's announcement is another step to address a problem recognized by fishing industry leaders. NOAA scientists and managers will continue to work closely with the fishing community and the states to improve compliance, and enhance use of fishing gear and techniques to prevent sea turtles from being caught in fishing nets.

In responding to the increased number of sea turtle deaths in the Gulf region, NOAA is also assessing potential impacts to sea turtles resulting from the Deepwater Horizon spill. Those injury assessment efforts are ongoing.

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On the web:

Meeting schedule: http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/ShrimpFishery_SeaTurtle.htm