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NATIONAL
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PROTECTED SPECIES GET MUCH NEEDED HELP
NOAA Fisheries Proposes Regulations to Reduce Bycatch of
Bottlenose Dolphins and Sea Turtles

The National Marine Fisheries Service is seeking public comment on a proposed rule to increase protection of bottlenose dolphins and some threatened species of sea turtles. The comment period began Nov. 10, with the publication of The Bottlenose Dolphin Take Reduction Plan in the Federal Register. NOAA Fisheries is an office of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The BDTRP, a package of measures developed to reduce the incidental mortality and serious injury or bycatch of Western North Atlantic coastal bottlenose dolphins, is based primarily on recommendations of the Bottlenose Dolphin Take Reduction Team. In addition to reducing bottlenose dolphin bycatch, the proposed rule contains measures that will benefit endangered and threatened sea turtles.

"It's very important that we continue to work with our partners to reduce bycatch," said Bill Hogarth, assistant administrator for NOAA Fisheries. "Hundreds of bottlenose dolphins and sea turtles are still dying each year in fishing gear in the Atlantic."

Under certain circumstances NOAA Fisheries is mandated by the Marine Mammal Protection Act to work with stakeholder-based Take Reduction Teams to reduce marine mammal bycatch in commercial fisheries by developing and implementing Take Reduction Plans. The teams advise NOAA Fisheries regarding bycatch reduction methods, providing information, creative solutions and formal recommendations, and by offering insight into the effectiveness of management measures.

The MMPA establishes both short and long-term goals for TRPs. The immediate

Western North Atlantic coastal bottlenose dolphins, ranging primarily from New Jersey to Florida, are considered “strategic” and “depleted;” special status designations under the MMPA. To address their current status, and specifically, to reduce bottlenose dolphin bycatch, NOAA Fisheries convened the BDTRT in November 2001. The BDTRT’s more than forty members, representing fishing industries, state and federal governments, environmental non-governmental organizations, researchers and academia, met several times from 2001 through 2003. The team reviewed bottlenose dolphin stock abundance and mortality information, developing strategies to reduce the serious injury and mortality resulting from incidental interactions with nine commercial fisheries, including the following; North Carolina Inshore Gillnet; Southeast Atlantic Gillnet; Southeastern United States Shark Gillnet; United States Mid-Atlantic Coastal Gillnet; Atlantic Blue Crab Trap/Pot; Mid-Atlantic Haul/Beach Seine; North Carolina Long Haul Seine; North Carolina Roe Mullet Stop Net; and Virginia Pound Net.

The BDTRT’s consensus recommendations served as the basis for the BDTRP, which includes recommendations for regulatory actions generally aimed at reducing the incidental mortality and serious injury of bottlenose dolphins. These include gear soak times, the amount of gear in the water at any given time, and modification of fishing practices. The BDTRT also recommended non-regulatory actions, including education and outreach initiatives, as well as measures to improve research, monitoring, and stranding data. In addition, this proposed rule contains measures that would extend a seasonal closure on large-mesh gillnet fishing to state waters in North Carolina and Virginia; restrictions that would reduce bycatch of both bottlenose dolphins and sea turtles.

NOAA Fisheries will accept public comments on this proposed rule until Feb. 8, 2005. Please send your comments to: Chief, Protected Resources Division, NOAA Fisheries, 9721 Executive Center Drive North, Suite 102, St. Petersburg, FL 33702-2432.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving the nation’s living marine resources and their habitats 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 customers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

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.