

# Reducing Sea Turtle Bycatch by Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Bottom Longline Gear

## What is the issue?

- Gulf of Mexico reef fish bottom longline gear takes loggerhead sea turtles as bycatch. These turtles are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.
- A September 2008 NOAA Fisheries Service report indicated the bottom longline component of the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery far exceeded the level of loggerhead sea turtle take authorized by a 2005 Biological Opinion.
  - The 2005 Biological Opinion authorized Gulf of Mexico reef fish bottom longline vessels to take 85 loggerhead sea turtles over a 3-year period.
  - The September 2008 report indicated Gulf of Mexico reef fish bottom longline gear took between 339 and 1,884 loggerhead sea turtles (average of 800) over an 18-month period (07/06 - 12/07).

## How did fishery managers respond?

### Short Term

- In May 2009, NOAA Fisheries Service published an emergency rule prohibiting the use of bottom longline gear in the reef fish fishery shoreward of a line approximating the 50-fathom depth contour in the eastern Gulf of Mexico (east of Cape San Blas, Florida) until the 2009 deepwater grouper and tilefish quotas were met and throughout the eastern Gulf of Mexico thereafter.
- This rule essentially closed the bottom longline sector of the reef fish fishery in the eastern Gulf of Mexico for six months pending the implementation of a long-term management strategy.

### Long-Term

- In August 2009, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) voted in favor of a long-term management strategy to reduce sea turtle take. This strategy would:
  - Prohibit the use of bottom longline gear in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery, shoreward of a line approximating the 35-fathom contour east of Cape San Blas, Florida from June through August;
  - Reduce the number of bottom longline vessels operating in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery through an endorsement provided only to vessel permits with a demonstrated history of landing, on average, at least 40,000 pounds of reef fish annually with fish traps or longline gear during 1999-2007; and
  - Restrict the total number of hooks that may be possessed onboard each Gulf of Mexico reef fish bottom longline vessel to 1,000, only 750 of which may be rigged for fishing.

### Interim

- In October 2009, NOAA Fisheries Service replaced the emergency rule with an alternative rule, which contains two of the three long-term actions proposed by the Council:
  - Prohibit the use of bottom longline gear in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery, shoreward of a line approximating the 35-fathom contour east of Cape San Blas, Florida; and
  - Restrict the total number of hooks that may be possessed onboard each Gulf of Mexico reef fish bottom longline vessel to 1,000, only 750 of which may be rigged for fishing.

## Why did NOAA Fisheries Service replace the emergency rule with alternative measures?

- Short-term action was required to maintain protective sea turtle measures pending implementation of a long-term management strategy.

- The emergency rule was scheduled to expire on October 29, 2009.
- If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the Council's proposed long-term management strategy could not likely be implemented earlier than May 2010.
- NOAA Fisheries Service considered the biological and socioeconomic impacts of retaining and extending the emergency rule versus implementing alternative measures.
- NOAA Fisheries Service elected to replace the emergency rule with alternative measures to maintain both adequate sea turtle protection and a viable bottom longline fleet until a long-term management strategy can be approved and implemented

**Are the replacement measures sufficiently protective?**

- Together with the emergency rule, the replacement measures are estimated to obtain the same reduction in sea turtle mortality as the Council's proposed long-term management strategy through the expected period of implementation (November 2009 – April 2010).
- A 2009 Biological Opinion evaluated the impacts of the replacement measures and the Council's proposed long-term management strategy on loggerhead sea turtles and other listed species.
- The opinion concluded the continued authorization of the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery under the replacement measures and the Council's long-term management strategy are not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of sea turtles or other listed species.

**Who will the rule affect?**

- About 120 bottom longline vessels participate in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery to varying degrees.