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NOAA Proposes Five Atlantic Sturgeon Populations for Listing as Endangered or Threatened

NOAA's Fisheries Service has proposed that five populations of Atlantic sturgeon along the U.S. East Coast receive protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. The Gulf of Maine population is proposed for listing as threatened, and endangered status is proposed for the Chesapeake Bay, New York Bight, Carolina, and South Atlantic populations.

Species listed as endangered receive the full protection of the Endangered Species Act, including a prohibition against "take," defined to include harassing, harming, pursuing, wounding, killing, trapping, capturing, or collecting. Similar prohibitions usually extend to threatened species. An endangered listing offers protections designed to prevent extinction. For threatened populations, protections are focused on preventing a species from becoming endangered.

A formal status review was completed for the Atlantic sturgeon in 2007 by a team of biologists from NOAA, the U.S. Geological Survey, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The review found that unintended catch of Atlantic sturgeon in fisheries, vessel strikes, poor water quality, dams, lack of regulatory mechanisms for protecting the fish, and dredging were the most significant threats to the fish.

Atlantic sturgeon are large, slow-growing, late-maturing, long-lived, estuary-dependent fish that live the majority of their lives in salt water, but hatch and spawn in freshwater. Historically, their range included major estuary and river systems from Labrador to Florida. Atlantic sturgeon populations are currently documented in 35 U.S. rivers and spawning is believed to occur in 20 of these. Because the marine range of an individual sturgeon can be very broad regardless of where it originated, threats along the East Coast can affect fish from any of these populations.

Historical catch records indicate that these fish were once abundant, supporting important colonial fisheries. In the late 19th century, demand grew for sturgeon caviar and the first major U.S. commercial fishery for them developed. This lasted from about 1870 until the 1950s with landings peaking in 1890. The commercial fishery collapsed in 1901 when landings were about 10 percent of the peak. Landings by fisheries targeting sturgeon declined to even less in subsequent years, persisting until a moratorium on landings was established in 1998. It is currently illegal to fish for, catch or keep Atlantic sturgeon from U.S. waters.

NOAA's Fisheries Service is accepting comments on the proposed listing through Jan. 4, 2011. NOAA's Fisheries Service is seeking comment particularly on abundance and distribution, viability, threats, and efforts being made to protect Atlantic sturgeon belonging to these populations. You may submit comments by any one of the following methods. The agency also plans to hold public hearings.

To submit comments on the Gulf of Maine, Chesapeake Bay and New York Bight proposed listing, identified by the XRIN 0648-XJ00, use any of the following methods:

- Submit comments online via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments;
- Fax comments to the attention of Lynn Lankshear at 978-281-9394;
- Mail or hand deliver written comments to the Assistant Regional Administrator, Protected Resources Division, NMFS, Northeast Region, 55 Great Republic Drive, Gloucester, MA 01930.

To submit comments on the Carolina and South Atlantic proposed listings, identified by the XRIN 0648-XN50, use any of the following methods:

- Submit comments online via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments;
- Fax comments to 727-824-5309;
- Mail or hand deliver written comments to the Assistant Regional Administrator for Protected Resources, NMFS, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701.

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