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**NOAA, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and
Audubon Nature Institute Return Sea Turtles to Gulf Waters**

Scientists from NOAA, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the Audubon Nature Institute joined with Coast Guard Rear Admiral Roy A. Nash today to return 32 sea turtles to Gulf of Mexico waters offshore of Louisiana. This is the first release of rehabilitated sea turtles to the waters near where they were rescued from oil more than three months ago—after extensive analysis to determine that the area is clean and a safe habitat for the turtles.

“Today’s release would not have been possible if all the partners had not worked tirelessly during the oil spill to search for, rescue and rehabilitate the sea turtles,” said Jane Lubchenco, Ph.D., under secretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. “We are able to release these turtles because they’re now healthy and we’re seeing recovery in the surface habitats of the Gulf of Mexico. They are being released within federal waters off the coast of Louisiana that earlier this month NOAA reopened to fishing. This was another important sign of improvement in the health of the Gulf of Mexico.”

Scientists selected the release location, approximately 40 miles southwest of Grand Isle, La., after conducting thorough aerial and shipboard surveys earlier this week to locate clean sargassum algae habitat for the sea turtles. Young sea turtles, such as those released today, spend the early years of their lives swimming and feeding in large floating sargassum algae mats that form in convergence zones where currents meet. Sargassum mats provide protection for turtles from predators as well as a variety of prey for food, including small crabs, snails and other creatures.

“I am excited to see these turtles returned to the waters from which they had been rescued during the spill – they’re going home today,” said Rear Adm. Nash, deputy federal on-scene coordinator for the ongoing clean-up operations. “Today’s release is possible because of the efforts of many to rehabilitate the turtles, and to ensure the Gulf waters are ready for their return. This is an encouraging sign that the Gulf of Mexico is recovering.”

The 32 turtles released today included species of green, Kemp’s ridley, hawksbill and loggerhead sea turtles. Green, Kemp’s ridley and hawksbill sea turtles are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Loggerheads are currently listed as threatened.

“For our staff, today has been long-awaited. Returning sea turtles to waters off the Louisiana coast is evidence of the incredible partnership between our biologists and enforcement agents, and our partnerships with local and federal agencies. Not only did our staff dedicate long days for months on end to the search, rescue and recovery of sea turtles and mammals, but they were committed even when the required tasks went above and beyond their jobs,” said Randy Pausina, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries assistant secretary for the state’s office of fisheries. “Returning this group of sea turtles to their home waters is

more than a great achievement for all of our dedicated staff, it is a sign that Louisiana is on the path towards recovery.”

The turtles released today were rescued by teams from NOAA, LDWF, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Riverhead Foundation and the In-Water Research Group. The turtles received extensive treatment and care, including cleaning and de-oiling, at the Audubon Nature Institute outside New Orleans.

"Six months ago, it was nearly impossible to imagine this day would ever come," said Ron Forman, president and CEO of the Audubon Nature Institute. "Audubon is privileged to have played a key role in this remarkable recovery. Words can't begin to describe how proud I am of our team and their incredible effort in rehabilitating nearly 200 turtles."

More than 500 live turtles were rescued during the Gulf oil spill and about 400 heavily or moderately oiled turtles were placed in rehabilitation. Those not placed in rehabilitation were immediately released in healthy surface habitats because they were lightly oiled and did not require rehabilitation. Today's release brings to 270 the number of rehabilitated turtles that have been returned to the Gulf of Mexico. The turtles remaining in rehabilitation facilities will be released as they are given clean bills of health.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Visit us at <http://www.noaa.gov> or on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/usnoaagov>.