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**NOAA releases first national bycatch report**  
*Establishes methodology, baseline for future studies*

A new NOAA report of data collected in 2005 will help the agency's scientists better monitor progress in reducing bycatch – the non-target fish, marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds caught incidentally in fishing.

Bycatch costs fishermen time and money, harms endangered and threatened species, affects marine and coastal ecosystems, and makes it more difficult for scientists to measure the effect of fishing on the stock's population, and for managers to set sustainable levels for fishing. Preventing and reducing bycatch is an important part of ensuring sustainable living marine resources and coastal communities. The 2006 reauthorization of the Magnuson Stevens Act, the nation's principal law for living marine resources, made bycatch reduction a priority, leading NOAA to establish a bycatch reduction program to develop technological devices and other conservation engineering solutions.

While the National Bycatch Report does not represent an estimate of current bycatch rates, it is the first to compile collect regional data about U.S. commercial fisheries into one nationwide report, found that 17 percent of fish caught commercially were harvested unintentionally. The report also details the numbers of marine mammals, sea turtles, and seabirds caught incidentally during fishing operations in 2005. The retrospective report provides a baseline for measuring bycatch reduction and establishes a consistent, comprehensive methodology for future studies.

"Fisheries managers, the fishing industry, and the environmental community share the goal of preventing and reducing bycatch, which is an important part of ending overfishing and ensuring sustainable marine resources," said Richard Merrick, Ph.D., NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service chief scientist. "This report helps us understand the extent of bycatch in the U.S. and the quality of our data about bycatch. As we update this report, we will see improvements in data quality and will measure the progress we believe management measures and technologies are having in reducing bycatch."

Since 2005, important steps have been taken to address bycatch in fisheries across the country. NOAA's Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program, which began in 2008, supports scientists working side-by-side with fishermen to test gear and fishing modifications which are often inspired by fishermen. The program has helped generate changes in fishing practices and technological solutions like ["weak hooks,"](#) which bend under pressure to allow the heavier bluefin tuna to free themselves from longline fishing hooks meant for yellowfin tuna and swordfish.

Cooperative research with fishermen across the country has helped design and test fishing gear to avoid bycatch, allow nontargeted species to escape nets or lines, and reduce harm to those species incidentally caught and released. NOAA's law enforcement personnel routinely assist fishermen through outreach and education programs to ensure proper use of required bycatch-avoidance gear, like turtle excluder devices.

The report provides baseline bycatch estimates for 481 species, including marine mammals, sea turtles, seabirds, and fish. It also presents bycatch estimates for 81 fisheries, which are defined by a combination of area, species, and fishing gear. A fishery can be made up of more than one fish species.

The report showed large differences between regions and fisheries in 2005. In some regions, such as the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, where fishermen can more easily catch fish without interacting with nontargeted species, unintended catch of fish amounted to seven percent in 2005. In other regions, where multispecies fisheries are more common, fishermen may find it much more difficult to avoid nontargeted species.

The report also evaluated the quality of bycatch data from the period for 152 federal fisheries or fisheries with federal data collection programs, finding that 46 percent had high-quality data in 2005. NOAA is working to improve the quality of bycatch data through regional fisheries observer programs and developing best practices for estimating bycatch. The report also includes recommendations on how bycatch data can be improved.

To complete the report, NOAA examined a variety of sources, including data from at-sea fisheries observers, commercial fishing logbooks, and production reports. NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service scientists from each regional office, science center, and headquarters office were involved in developing the estimates and the report, including scientists who undertake stock assessments for fish and protected species.

Actions by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, stakeholder groups, and the regional fishery management councils have also reduced bycatch. In the southwest region, bycatch of whales, dolphins and porpoises has been reduced by half since 1997, when fishermen in the California drift gillnet fishery were required to use acoustic pingers, underwater sound-emitting devices that alert animals to the net, decreasing the probability of entanglement. In Hawaii, longline vessels reduced seabird interactions with fishermen by 92 to 95 percent by thawing and dyeing fish bait blue to make it less visible to the birds. Catch shares and industry-managed cooperatives have changed fleet behavior in Alaska and the Northwest, reducing economic discards, or the disposal of target fish that are of undesirable size, sex or quality.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that NOAA's conservation and management measures minimize bycatch to the extent practicable. Bycatch data are important information used by managers in setting annual catch limits and scientists in producing stock assessments for fish and protected species. Conservation and management measures are developed through a public process by the eight regional fishery management councils, which include members who represent commercial fishing, recreational fishing, environmental interests, and academia. Improved data on the scope of the problem and how bycatch reduction measures are working will help councils and fishermen increasingly avoid the costly and wasteful problem of bycatch.

NOAA's National Bycatch Report is available [online](#). The agency continues to collect data on bycatch in preparation for the next edition of the national bycatch report, scheduled for 2013. Future editions in the report will be used to monitor changes and trends in bycatch, including as a result of new regulations, bycatch reduction devices, changes in fishing patterns, and population fluctuations in both targeted and bycatch species.

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. Join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and our other [social media channels](#).

On the web:

Bycatch fact sheets by region: [http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/stories/2011/09/22\\_bycatch.html](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/stories/2011/09/22_bycatch.html)

Bycatch photo gallery:

[http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/gallery/images/category/reducing\\_bycatch.html](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/gallery/images/category/reducing_bycatch.html)

National bycatch report: [http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/by\\_catch/bycatch\\_nationalreport.htm](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/by_catch/bycatch_nationalreport.htm)

NOAA Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program: 2011 Report to Congress:

[http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/by\\_catch/docs/brep\\_final\\_2011.pdf](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/by_catch/docs/brep_final_2011.pdf)