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NOAA PUBLISHES ATLANTIC LARGE WHALE TAKE REDUCTION PLAN *Proposed Rule Opens for Public Comment*

The NOAA Fisheries Service today announced publication of a proposed rule to further reduce entanglements of large whales in commercial fishing gear along the U.S. East Coast. The proposed rule would revise the agency's current regulations under the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan that were established to reduce the risk of large whale entanglements in pot/trap and gillnet gear.

Proposed modifications would require more trap/pot and gillnet fisheries to use modified gear, reduce the use of line that hangs vertically in the water or floats along the ocean bottom, and expand gear marking requirements. The Agency also proposes to revise boundaries and seasons for management areas and exempted waters (where the rules would not apply).

"We believe this proposed rule contains the best options we can put in place now to further reduce whale entanglements," said Dr. Bill Hogarth, NOAA Fisheries Service director. "We continue to work with researchers, fishermen, conservationists and other colleagues to understand the problem, and to find ways to reduce serious injury and mortality of large whales due to incidental entanglement in fishing gear."

NOAA Fisheries Service issued a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) on the action on February 25. The DEIS provided detailed analysis of the six proposed alternatives being considered. The analysis evaluated the impacts that each of the alternatives would have on the human environment including biological, social and economic impacts. NOAA Fisheries Service held 13 public hearings on the DEIS from Maine to Florida during March and April. NOAA Fisheries Service will consider and respond to comments received on the DEIS and proposed rule, as they develop the final rule.

Since 1996, NOAA Fisheries Service has been working to eliminate the dangers posed to large whales by commercial fishing operations through a program of research, consultation with the fishing industry and whale experts, and regulatory actions. Several species of large whales frequently get entangled in fishing gear. One of the most susceptible to entanglement injury, the North Atlantic right whale, is also one of the most endangered.

More

NOAA Fisheries Service will accept comments on the proposed rule through July 21, 2005. Comments can be submitted by mail, e-mail and fax. For more information on submitting comments, see <http://a257.g.akamaitech.net/7/257/2422/01jan20051800/edocket.access.gpo.gov/2005/pdf/05-11847.pdf> or contact Diane Borggaard, NOAA Fisheries Service, Northeast Regional Office, (978) 281-9300, Ext. 6503.

For more information, please visit the agency's special website for this action, where relevant materials, including a summary outreach document can be viewed or downloaded: <http://www.nero.noaa.gov/nero/hotnews/whales/index.html>

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service 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 consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, 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 the nation's coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

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